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How to cite

Torres Velasco, J. (2019). Civilization and Sport in Colombia's Drive to Modernization. *Journal of Mediterranean Knowledge-JMK*, 4(1), 55-77. DOI: 10.26409/2019JMK4.1.04

Retrieved from

<http://www.mediterraneanknowledge.org/publications/index.php/journal/issue/archive>

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Article first published online: June 2019



- Peer Reviewed Journal

INDEXED IN
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Civilization and Sport in Colombia's Drive to Modernization

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Abstract

This paper discusses the manner in which modern spectator sports developed in Colombia in the decade of the 1920s as part of the country's efforts to modernize. An examination of the dominant theories of the diffusion of European sports to the Latin American elites and eventually to the populace as a technique for social control is undertaken. Scant immigration into the country as well as high mortality rates for men and women resulting from civil war and disease make Colombia a case of special interest. Rather than the introduction of a single sport, we embark on an analysis of leisure, scouting, gymnastics, and sports to describe the matrix from which sporting practices develop. A careful examination of the 1920s press reports allows for a careful description of the roots of these physical activities, the emergence of a new social actor, the sportsperson, and the role of state regulation in the field of sports.

Keywords: History of Colombia, History of Sport, Modernization.

Introduction

This article examines the development of sport in Colombia in the second decade of the twentieth century. This was a time of change, one marked by a collective aspiration for peace and progress. The nation strove to lift itself up to the standards of Western civilization. At the start of his term in office, President Pedro Nel Ospina (1924-1926) stated, "Our situation has changed greatly; we are now in contact with the world" (Osorio, 1923, p. 368).

Breaking away from isolation is not an easy task. The direction and pace of change are always a contested matter. High values are at stake and political forces, old and new, take the stage to confront ideas and mobilize social aspirations. Ideologues, clergymen, and men of action, political parties, and a dense fabric of social forces collided signaling that this was not a quiescent time (Rueda, 1925, p. 454). For some observers the intensity of the dispute seemed to set society apart from its representatives. Episodes

of violence darkened the decade, as observed in the 1928 massacre of agricultural workers in a banana enclave in the Caribbean region.

Leisure, sport, an appreciation for the outdoors, gymnastics and, more generally, the predisposition of mind and body through physical education were another set of cherished values consistent with civilization. Entrepreneurs, the press, social clubs, schools, political parties, and the government became active participants in the development of sports during the 1920s. I suggest that sports and the sporting experience are a key dimension of social change and governmental intervention in the quest for modernization. How did sports develop during this decade? What forms of organization emerged? How did the governments of the period intervene to organize sports?

To carry out this investigation I reviewed the issues of the *Cromos* weekly magazine from January 1920 through December 1929. Under the direction of Luis Tamayo, the magazine's editorial line reflects a moderate "liberal" view extolling patriotic virtues and celebrating cultural achievements, among which sport is consistently present.

1. The limits of diffusionist theories of sport

In their Introduction to the edited volume of *Sport in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Joseph Arbena and David LaFrance (2002) state that by the middle of the Nineteenth Century "three interrelated trends in the area of games and sports had become obvious. First, the few persisting indigenous forms virtually disappeared. Second, folk culture was attacked as an impediment to progress [...] Third, sport became increasingly tied to the spread of so-called modern, European culture and its evolving recreational practices" (p. xii).

I will take distance from this thesis as well as other variants of the "diffusionist" theories of sport. A dominant stream of studies on Latin American sports partakes of such models of cultural imposition through elite agency; other strands of analysis view sport as an expression of world power in the age of colonial empire (Tomlinson & Young, 2010; Van Bottenburg, 2010).

Available literature on the history and sociology of sports in the region tends to emphasize the influence of European culture on the local elites.

Waves of migrants attracted by the upcoming economies of Latin America as well as Latin visitors and students travelling through Europe (principally England or France) or the United States were the channels through which sports journeyed across the Atlantic. The "social club", the "sports club" or the "sports association" are presented as the landing grounds for sports, isles from which they gradually spread to the populace, propelled by populist or reformist policies.

In this vein, Matus, Vilanova, Puig, and Vidal (2018) explore the emergence of modern sports clubs in Chile as the result of British influence. According to the authors, "sport in Chile originated in the aristocracy, as the British [migrants] introduced cricket, hunting, golf and tennis in their relations with the [Chilean] upper classes. From this [pattern] one can suggest that the extension of sports occurred from this stratum to the rest of society". (pp. 284-285)

In their study on Brazilian sport De Melo (2013) argues that, "Foreign influence is an essential factor in the development of the sport field in Brazil. Europeans brought with them [...] organized sport and were enthusiastic proselytizers of physical activities. The British were especially prominent in the nineteenth century in this regard" (p. 378). Fernandes da Silva y Zarpellon (2015) study how rowing emerged in late nineteenth century Porto Alegre, Brazil, as a sporting practice introduced by German migrants who were attracted by the cosmopolitan impulse of the port city.

Julio Frydenberg (2017) shows how late nineteenth century European immigration into Argentina may account for the introduction of football (soccer), especially through the British School system of Buenos Aires. The author argues that not only the game itself, but also the importation of the rules of the sport and the ethos of sportsmanship allowed for the early creation of the Argentine Association Football League (AAFL) in 1891. This model of organization may have preceded the massification of the sport from the original British clubs to creole football clubs and business sponsored teams in Argentina as well as Brazil (Malaia Santos, 2013).

Colombia hardly fits these models. Colombian travel overseas was limited to a select few. Palacios argues that after 1903 a stronger *peso* stimulated travel and residence of Colombians abroad for long periods. "Some families sent their children [abroad] for university education or to specialize in commerce as workers of some reputable business" (Palacios, 2015, p. 219; Melo, 2017). Nevertheless, a few European and U. S.

immigrants as well as Colombians who had studied abroad were influential in the early development of industry and promoted the formation of social clubs (Ramírez, 2015; Ruiz, 2010).

Migratory flows into the country at the beginning of the twentieth century were meagre at best. The Thousand Days War (1899-1902) clearly signaled a violent nation, and the separation of Panama in 1903 left the nation in a state of dismay, exhaustion, and poverty. The 1912 census reported that foreign residents only accounted for 0.2% of the population; twenty-one years later this figure had risen to 0.3%.

Immigration policies were unclear, ineffective, expensive, and discriminatory. Notwithstanding the fact that people of Middle Eastern origin were the main source of immigration into the country, in the 1930s the authorities authorized quotas of ten migrants of Syrian origin, ten Lebanese, and ten Palestinians per year (Vargas, 2011). Catholics and the conservative politics of the *Regeneración* inspired distrust for foreign presence in the country. Nevertheless, an increased number of migrants from foreign religious orders were admitted into the country since 1880, occupying a high proportion of the regular clergy, 40% priests and 20% nuns (Palacios & Safford, 2013). Catholic orders founded schools and charities, introducing gymnastics, and sports to alumni and poor children.

Between 1870 and 1918, the average life span for Colombian women was estimated at 36.9 years and 31.05 years for men. Accidents and civil war accounted for the major causes of death among men (Meisel & Romero, 2017). Disease was a matter of concern for policy makers. Leprosy was widespread prompting the Reyes government (1904-1909) to develop confinement centers for the infected population (Sanin, 1909). Influenza was a major cause of death among the central Andes population, accounting for 9.5% of the registered deaths from 1912 to 1927, mostly infants. An influenza epidemic in 1918 and 1919 was especially severe in Bogotá and the neighboring department of Boyacá (Manrique, Martínez, Meléndez & Ospina, 2009).

Notwithstanding the weight of this evidence, Colombian researchers tend to view sports mainly as a technique of social control appropriated by dominant social classes or elites through the enforcement of hygiene and schooling (Pedraza, 1999). Others suggests that Colombia's novel agrarian commercial class broke from the previous elite control of the population through civil war. In its new position of influence, it sought, "[to] replace

nineteenth century pastimes for newer [ones] such as football" (Ruiz, 2010, p. 37).

Rodríguez (2013) contends that a small fraction of the elite including businessmen, politicians, educators, and medical hygienists, among others, initiated a "public sanitation program that undertook to discipline the popular sectors [...] Evils such as uncleanliness, [poor] use of time, consumption of *chicha* (fermented corn brew), absence of urban rules, labor discipline, the use of *alpartagas* (sisal footwear) and *ruanas* (woolen ponchos) as well as [...] new time allotments as demanded by the bourgeois model, including time for leisure" (pp. 169 - 170).

Unsatisfactorily, sports in Colombia are presented as a convenient functional requisite for agrarian classes who hope to retain power or of an emerging bourgeoisie that hopes to conquer it.¹ Instead, this investigation contends that "sportization" is a highly complex long-term process better understood as a pattern of collective interaction and exchange. Consequently, my focus is not on any single sports discipline, but on all sporting activities present in Colombia during the 1920s. Hence, leisure time spent outdoors, "excursionism" or scoutism, gymnastics, and spectator sports are the four dimensions I propose to analyze the development of sports in Colombia.

2. Leisure and scouting

To overcome Colombia's adverse social, political and economic conditions, cities were redesigned and public services (water, urban transportation, electricity, telephone and telegraph) began to be provided by private and public companies; rail, road, river, and airline projects flourished as a manner to integrate the country. New teaching methods were widely discussed, public education reforms were introduced, and hospitals built. Foreign policy was dictated by the urge to solidify the country's borders and participate in world commerce and international financial circuits. All public activities were grounded on the values of

¹ Sport is often equated with culture and to culture's political functions, including the hegemonic effects of culture. The difficulty stems from what Tomlinson and Young consider the lack of a "demarcated sport history (Horn, 1997; Tomlinson, 2010).

patriotism, order, intellectual achievement, high culture, youth, race, and the Hispanic heritage, including the Catholic faith.

Internal migration and low salaries produced a mass of impoverished peasant migrants who populated the cities attracted by the promise of work. In a 1924 interview, the Minister of Industry, General Diógenes Reyes, stated: "The immigration of capital [rather than labor] is preferable for the well-being of the people [...] we do not have the opportunity to develop large industry as in the United States because [financial] resources are scarce. We must rely on cheap wages." (*Cromos*, 1924, XVII, p. 400).

Early in 1920, working class neighborhoods called for the development of urban public services to improve the living conditions (Castillo, 1920, p. 195). However, the accommodated classes also lacked many of these services. Living in the cities was uncomfortable, and health hazards were abundant. Many found that urban life was dull.

Enjoyment of the outdoors became a cherished value as it promised to provide mental and physical health for all. Country summer travel was advertised and student excursions organized to visit distant regions. So too, physical exercise and intellectual achievement were considered the keys to a balanced society. Early in 1920 an article on the "Proper social entertainment" appeared in *Cromos*: "[The countryside is] a soothing experience, [it is a fountain of] hope, rhythm, laughter, sport, sufficient air and water to bring a modicum of health and equilibrium [to those who enjoy it]" (*Cromos*, 1924, XVII, p. 40).

Public parks were considered the responsibility of government, giving citizens the opportunity to enjoy outdoor entertainment. *Cromos*, 1924, XVIII, p. 42). Nonetheless, a private citizen, Nicolás Liévano, designed and donated Bogota's Luna Park in 1921, a site suitable for the organization of social events, recreation, and sports (Ríos, 2015). The park became a popular site to practice football, boxing, swimming and rowing. The National Federation of Students organized meetings and parties in the park facilities. As part of the Student Festival of 1921, the organizers programmed bicycle races, swimming and track competitions, as well as regattas.

The 1924 Workers' Congress also convened in Luna Park to discuss new social legislation as well as the adoption of new models of education in the school system. (Londoño, 2004). Tila Uribe recalls that workers organizations of the 1920s, "campaigns against alcoholism, gambling,

disregard for human misery, [and against] capitalist charity [...]. In 1927 union leader Fideligno Cuellar initiated another campaign that spread like fire: to include Physical Education and chess as required assignments in school curricula for children and youths" (Uribe, 1994, p. 140).

Similarly, Pacific Railway construction engineer Ricardo Pérez believed that recreation for the workers would improve productivity. According to Pérez, "Large companies should be forced to provide lodging for their employees and workers, reduce alcohol consumption, provide hospitals and schools, deliver technical education, and guided recreation" (Cromos, 1924, XVIII, p. 429).

New generations of Colombians were to be educated in the appreciation of outdoor recreation and physical development. Educators of liberal schools influenced by Belgian pedagogue Ovide Decroly, introduced the practice of sports, scouting, and direct outdoor experimentation in the curricula. The "New School" system would break with the traditional models of disciplinary education.

The Gimnasio Moderno, an elite school in Bogotá, was hailed as the leading institution implementing the new system. In contrast, Eduardo Castillo wrote, "Intellectual as well as physical education enjoy a solid foundation [in the school's curriculum]. Daily bath, sport, and access to sun and clean air strengthen the children's bodies [...] As I observe [these activities,] I cannot but think of the students in the boarding schools of the capital city, poor locked-up children, with pale skin as a consequence of their confinement and by the [rigor] of mental efforts not balanced by physical exercise." (Cromos, 1920, X, p. 195). Other institutions such as the *Gimnasio Obrero* and the *Hospicio* boarding school for poor children, and, later in the decade, the *Gimnasio Femenino* (Cromos, 1927, XXIII, p. 549) in Bogotá implemented the same philosophy (Castro et al., 1999).

Catholic charities such as that organized by José María Campoamor, a member of the Saint Ignatius community, built the San Francisco Javier workers' neighborhood 'Barrio Obrero' in Bogotá developing similar approaches for community building in the outdoors. Construction of forty homes, a school, medical facilities, a swimming pool, and a chapel required funding from the workers' savings solidarity fund, the *Círculo Obrero*, and matching funds from private donors (Cromos, 1920, X, p. 239).

Scouting by Gimnasio Moderno students spanned the decade. The school organized an excursion to the central and western departments of

Colombia in 1920. Other schools also organized student trips. Bogotá's *Escuela Ricaurte* travelled to the Caribbean coast in 1924 and *Universidad Libre* students visited the Pacific coast in Buenaventura one year later. Student exchange visits also took place between the *Yanaconas* from Cali and Buga's *Santo Tomás* students.

As student expeditions gained momentum, Law 23 of 1925 determined that government must fund such visits from the national, regional, and local budgets. With this authorization at hand, the Director for Public Instruction of Cundinamarca, José María de Guzmán, issued Directive 7 of that year ordering the first general excursion of male student schools in the department to visit Bogotá. (*Cromos*, 1925, XX, p. 477). Germán Arciniegas, a prominent intellectual, enthusiastically supported the visit of ten thousand boys to the capital city. (*Cromos*, 1925, XX, p. 478). Public Instruction Minister Vernaza, however, believed expeditions were a total waste of time, an opinion that confronted his office with the student organizations (*Cromos*, 1926, XXII, p. 512). However, interest in scouting did not subside. Miguel Jiménez López, Colombia's ambassador to Berlin explained the importance of the Boy Scouts as an institution and the principles of its organization. (*Cromos*, 1929, XXIII, p. 559).

I suggest that leisure and scoutism were gateways through which broad sectors of society entered into contact with the country and gained a first hand knowledge of its geography, its peoples, and its government. Schools, worker's organizations, charities, and government officials valued the outdoors and sought to build children's character and physical well-being. Cultivating the national spirit and confronting health issues were certainly key dimensions that help explain the collective interest in outdoor activities.

3. *Gymnastics and sports*

Colombia exhibits a long tradition of physical education in gymnastics, possibly since 1826. Innovations introduced in the country's nineteenth century education system included "tumbling, exercising with a ball, dancing, military exercises and use of rifles. [As well as] running and wrestling" (Pinillos, 2003, p. 64). The 1870 education reform undertaken by the Radical liberals incorporated the German Mission's recommendation

concerning the development of calisthenics and gymnastics in the school curricula. Colombia's Military School pushed for the cadets' gymnastics instruction. "During a military review in 1891 [U. S. Army Lieutenant Henry Lemly] presented racing and jumping competitions along with closed order and rifle exercises" (Ávila 2012 quoted by Esquivel, 2017, p. 241). Legislation reinstated the German Mission recommendations in 1903 and 1904, thus extending gymnastics to the entire educational system (Esquivel, 2017; Alfonso, 2012).

Arguments abound suggesting that the grip of the Catholic Church over Colombia's education was an obstacle to the development of physical education. Pinillos (2003) states that Catholics regarded physical exercise as punishment, consequently opposing physical education programs. However, Michael Krüger (2018) cogently argues that sports are closely tied to ethical and moral questions. The Protestant Reform and subsequent Catholic reinterpretation of St. Paul's epistles, especially in the Jesuit Order, lead to the idea "that public education [included] education of the body" (Krüger, 2018, p. 14).

In this vein, the Minister of Public Instruction announced in 1923 that the government would convene a mission of educators from Belgian, Swiss, or German Catholic provinces to reform the country's educational system. Among other objectives, the reform should "inculcate in students the need for hygiene and physical education" (*Cromos*, 1923, p. 380).

The Lasalle School in Bogotá (*Salesiano*) hired German professor Gottfried Schlecht to lead the calisthenics program for students (*Cromos*, 1925, XIX, 454) and the Ricaurte School (*Escuela Ricaurte*) hired Herman Ermert in 1926 (*Cromos*, 1926, p. 519).

In 1927, the national government hired Hans Huber, to teach gymnastics courses in four Bogotá schools; primary level schoolteachers receiving instruction would serve as multipliers. The program included "free exercises selected from German and Swedish gymnastics; exercises with equipment, running, jumping, and throwing exercises" (Alfonso, 2012, pp. 28-29).

Public exhibitions of student gymnasts (*revistas de gimnasia*) were frequent as scores of male schoolchildren and youngsters worked through calisthenics and German or Swedish gymnastics exercises (Rúa & Pinillos 2014). The 1924 National Olympic Games featured a gymnastics show including exercises with rifles and bicycles (*Cromos*, 1924, p. 413).

The 1927 Games also presented a program of Swedish gymnastics, but incorporated new sports such as polo, baseball, basketball, tennis, field hockey and athletic competitions (*Cromos*, 1927, XXIII, p. 562).

One could argue that gymnastics and modern sports are closely related, as the first is conducive to the second manner of physical activity. However, we cannot conclude that a linear trajectory stemming from gymnastics and leading to the adoption of modern sports exists (Van Bottenburg, 2010). Instead, gymnastics appear in Colombia as constitutive of physical education programs in schools as well as social club activities and public exhibitions of collective aestheticism and organization. The objective of gymnastics was the preparation of the mind through systematic physical activity rather than the pursuit of victory by means of competitive effort as required by sports.

The suppression of traditional or indigenous sports and their replacement by modern ones as suggested by Arbena and LaFrance (2002) does not hold for Colombia. Indeed, games of aboriginal or Spanish origins prevailed over time as a sporting practice. *Tejo* or *turmequé* is perhaps the only indigenous sport of Colombia that became widely practiced by all social classes, including members of the Magdalena Club in Bogotá in the 1920s (Bernal, 2008; Abello, 2013).

Bullfighting was widely practiced in Colombia by all social groups including native indigenous peoples and afrodescendants. Renowned matadors Rafael Gómez Ortega, *El Gallo*, and José Mejías Jiménez, *Bienvenida*, performed in the San Diego plaza in Bogotá in front of a crowd of six thousand spectators (*Cromos*, 1922, XIV, p. 312). Despite public opposition to the killing of the bulls by matadors, early twentieth century citizens enthusiastically attended the *corridos* in bullrings throughout the country. Those in favor considered bullfighting as a “diversion, a matter of personal choice” (*Cromos*, 1925, p. 458).

Other “games in the arena” such as the *corralejás*, a variation of bullfighting, were sponsored by the Caribbean plains landowners and staged during popular festivities in the small villages (Hernández, 2014; Fals, 2002). Further, the *coleo*², a game of skill, strength, and speed has been

² *Coleo* competitions involve equestrians who race to stop a fugitive bull, grabbing it by the tail to turn and topple the animal in the least time. Prize money and local reputation are rewarded the fastest *coleadores*.

widely practiced in the eastern *llanos* basin of Colombia and Venezuela since the sixteenth century (Pabón, 2017). These sporting events and popular festivities called for the attendance of large numbers of spectators and built a strong sense of regional pride.

Boxing occupied a prominent place in the 1920s. This sport spanned the nation from the Caribbean coastal region to Bogotá eliciting great interest. World championship fights such as the 1921 Carpentier – Dempsey bout carried a strong local appeal. Colombians also admired Argentinian boxing champion Miguel Angel Firpo as a creole challenger of the developed world. (*Cromos*, 1923, p. 345)

Raúl Porto recalled that the Carpentier - Dempsey match gave way to “a movement of people who wanted to become boxers. *El Porvenir*, a Cartagena journal, took the opportunity and opened inscriptions for all those who wished to become [boxing] champions... [Within] two days eighty men signed up” (Quitíán, 2016, pp. 77-78). Theater, circus, and bullfighting entrepreneurs such as the Párraga brothers staged popular bouts in Cartagena's Serrezuela circus.

Nevertheless, in the early years of twentieth century, some thought that boxing was “a plague, worse than the one that had decimated the city in the past century” (Quitíán, 2016, p. 77). Renowned boxers such as Bogotá's Rafael Tanco trained out of the public eye as elites were opposed to this ungentlemanly sport. Tanco, a boxer from Bogotá, was probably a prizefighter who fought local foreign residents in private clubs.

Tanco's record as a boxer was impressive; he triumphed over challengers such as Wollis Spyers, Serventi, and Vaughn. Before Tanco's bout with Rene Van der Horde, a Dutch resident of Bogotá, in August 1921, his victory over Mr. Bethell, the British Director of the *Colombia* magazine in the capital, were highlights in his career. *Cromos* presented the Tanco – Van der Horde boxing match as the “Colombian Boxing Championship”, and reported that betting of a significant amount of dollars took place. The press published a detailed report comparing the boxer's size and covered the training of both athletes before the fight. The weekly magazine reported that Van der Horde followed an orderly life; a routine of “Swedish gymnastics” and punching bag exercises followed by walking or jogging all of which made him a strong opponent. His trainers were also his sparring partners (*Cromos*, 1921, XII, p. 264).

After winning the fight with Van der Horde, Tanco was challenged by Ben Brewer, a U. S. citizen who managed platinum mines in Colombia's western region of Chocó. Brewer was presented as the boxing champion of Arizona. He exhibited a record of fights that included victories in Mexico and Cuba. Reportedly, Brewer practiced other sports including Greco-Roman wrestling, tennis and American football; he was also a reputed hunter. The fighter's representatives, Agustin Casabianca, and Mr. Kidross, agreed to change the scheduled date of the fight as Kidross argued that Brewer had very few days to train in Bogotá's altitude while Tanco was well prepared. A boxer from Cartagena, Ramón Rodríguez, acted as Brewer's sparring partner. The company organizing the match and the fighters agreed that the winner would take four thousand dollars and none for the loser.

Clearly, these boxing matches reveal a growing interest in the technical aspects of sports, a matter that demanded knowledge not only of the rules of the sport, but of the sports discipline itself as well as the sciences associated with the improvement of the athletes' performance, an antecedent of the professionalization of sports. Carlos Ortiz wrote, "We are not educated for this [...] we need [to educate ourselves] in sports and science" (*Cromos*, 1921, XII, n.p.). When compared to boxing, Colombia's experience with football was grounded not in the media and occasional entrepreneurs, but in core social institutions, schools and social clubs. Historian Enrique Santos (2005) believes that this sport was first played in the Military School in 1892 under the auspices of Henry Lemly. From this vantage point, the game gradually gained a wide audience and the governments' acceptance.

Bogotá's Catholic schools such as the Jesuit community run *Colegio San Bartolomé*, organized its own football team, *Bartolino*, in 1912 sponsored by Father Gumersindo Lizarraga. A proper field for the practice of the sport was built in La Merced, a property belonging to the Jesuit Community (Santos, 2005). Students of the strict San José School of Medellín, run by the Lassallian Catholic Order, enjoyed a curriculum offering physical education classes along with football and basketball teams, all of which had English names (Londoño, 2004). Other non-confessional schools, such as the Gimnasio Moderno also included football among its sporting activities. Institutes for higher education such as the *Instituto Técnico Central* or the

School of Medicine in Bogotá were active participants in football tournaments.

Given these origins, football competition rapidly won social acceptance. On June 27, 1920, the *Bartolino* and *Centenario* teams met in the Magdalena field to play the final match of the Concha Football Cup. A large crowd witnessed the game won by the *Bartolino* team. Spanish Prince Juan de Borbón presented the winners with the trophy (*Cromos*, 1920, IX, p. 216). The *El Cid* football club, a sporting branch of the School of Medicine, won the 1924 "Colombian Olympic Games" final match against the Military School. Among the *El Cid* defensive backs was an experienced British footballer, Bell Ruges (*Cromos*, 1924, XVIII, p. 419). *El Cid* also won the 1926 football championship, having registered an Italian immigrant in its lineup, Ennio Viola, who had played for the Juventus professional football team of Turin in 1921 Alejandro Pino (2015). Football teams from other regions in Colombia challenged the Bogotá squads, giving the sport a strong flavor of interregional rivalry. Twenty thousand spectators attended the match between the *Bartolino* and *Medellín* teams during the 1927 Colombian Olympic Games (*Cromos*, 1927, XXIV, p. 568).

Pino (2015) suggests that 1924 represents a turning point for football in Colombia. Indeed, the Paris Olympic Games became of special interest to Colombians as Argentina and Uruguay participated for the first time in these competitions. Unexpectedly, the Uruguay football team won the gold Olympic medal, an accomplishment that the local public opinion took to suggest that Colombia should prepare itself to participate in international sporting events such as these. Uruguay's success meant, "[The] rebirth of Colombian football as the clubs returned to practice and the [participation of] workers in the sport grew [...] football served to level society" (Pino, 2015).

Participation in the international Olympic Games was a goal to be reached. In February 1928, the *Colombia* football team challenged *El Cid* to play a match in order to collect funds to send the national team to the Amsterdam Olympics (*Cromos*, 1928, XXV, p. 597). Further, in March 1929 the football Committee for Cundinamarca met to organize a series of games between local teams and a Peruvian squad, the "Association". Among the Peruvian players were swimmers, renowned athletes, as well as members of the Lima Cricket Club. The Austrian born goalkeeper of the Peruvian team, Berdicka, was presented as the team's star performer (*Cromos*, 1929, XX, p. 650). A few months later, in September 1929 another Peruvian

football team, “Chancay” played the *Samarío* club, the national football champion of that year. Both visiting teams won every match they played against Colombian opponents.

To better qualify the “levelling social impact” of sports, I suggest that football became an early avenue for the social recognition of sportsmen (and women), persons recognized for their abilities in the game. The 1920s suggest the appearance of a new social role, the sportsperson (*deportista*), clearly different from “students” or “clubmen”, a significant innovation in the nation’s social makeup. As a corollary, public recognition of sportspersons grew. As César Julio Rodríguez claimed, “It is true that the era of sports in Colombia has begun [...] the trend that has taken over the world is felt among us [...] we have a thirst for information [...]. [A] young person is more interested today in sporting news than any other discovery” (*Cromos*, 1924, XVIII, p. 419).

Other sports gained regional popularity in Colombia during the 1920s. Baseball was played in Marialabaja, in the Caribbean department of Bolívar since 1874, possibly influenced by Cuba and cattle trade in the north coastal plain (Porto, 2013). On their return from a study trip to the United States, Gonzalo and Ernesto Zúñiga brought baseball equipment back to Cartagena; the records show that the game was played in the walled city in 1905 (Riola, 2015).

Cromos began reporting on baseball games since 1925. In fact, “La Salle” and “Cartagena” teams organized a baseball game to collect funds for a charity organization, *Estrella de la Caridad* - Star of Charity - (*Cromos*, 1925, XX, p. 480). Caribbean coast department teams “Barranquilla” and “Cartagena” faced each other in the “Juana de Arco” field, a testimony of the roots this sport acquired in the region. Baseball was included in the 1927 Colombian Olympic Games along with basketball, although news coverage of the competitions is not available.

Polo, golf, tennis, and equestrian sports, among others, acquired a strong class accent as dues paying social clubs began operations in the 1920s. Federico Carlos Child, the son of a British citizen born in Bogotá, presented the game of polo and founded the Bogotá Polo Club in 1897 (*Cromos*, 1923, XVI, p. 380) Nevertheless, polo matches took place in Bogotá’s Magdalena field as well as in the haciendas of wealthy *Bogotanos* since 1890.

Golf demonstrates similar beginnings in Colombia. The Bogotá Country Club was established in 1917 and Eduardo Uribe, a key promoter of golf, founded the *Club de Golf* in 1921. The Country Club members initially rented land from the Bank of Colombia (*Banco de Colombia*) to build a golf course. Later, in 1927, members purchased the fifty-hectare *Hacienda El Retiro* to build the club facilities ("La historia del Country comenzó hace 90 años", 2007).

The gentlemen's Jockey Club sponsored horseracing since 1892. The upper classes attended the horseracing seasons exhibiting the latest fashion and newly purchased cars. So too car and motorcycling competitions were organized in the city outskirts. Ms. Bauer, wife of Scadta airline manager Von Bauer, drove her car at 100 kilometers per hour in her victory during the car and motorcycling races organized between the train Central Station of Bogotá and the Bosa bridge (*Cromos*, 1923, XVI, p. 366).

Fashion and specialized sportswear underscored the social class bias of some of the sport disciplines practiced in Colombia during the period. Importers such as Ernesto Duperly owned and managed one of the first stores of this kind in the capital city since 1893. Polo players' helmets and apparel were imported from Scotts and, later, Scloss manufacturers in London; Wills & Pradilla and Michelsen imported emblems from Swiss producers Huguenin Frères. Local carpenter Feliciano Navarrete made the wooden balls for polo from willow tress until the 1930s when Spalding took over the local market (Polo Club, n. d.). Interestingly, sports opened new business opportunities for local entrepreneurs, but also tensions with artisans who sought protection for their trade.

Tennis became a popular sport for both men and women during the 1920s. Elvira Cuervo Pérez and Leonor Uribe played the final match in a tournament organized by the America Sport Club in 1921 (*Cromos*, 1921, XII, p. 280). Elvira Anzola won the "Trujillo Cup" of tennis in the Magdalena Sport Club, an institution that also promoted basketball games for women (*Cromos*, 1926, XXI, p. 495, 1927, XXIII, p. 549).³ Schools and workers' guilds clubs, such as the *Centro Social Obrero* in Bucaramanga also promoted the game of tennis (*Cromos*, 1920, IX, p. 195).

Athletic, swimming, diving, and bicycling competitions gained momentum during the decade. The organization of national and regional

³ Women's participation in wrestling, boxing, and fencing was not encouraged.

games as well as the appearance of regional sports commissions created incentives for the introduction of new disciplines. At the end of 1929, the first two stage “resistance bicycle race” took place between Bogotá and Tunja covering a distance of 326 kilometers (*Cromos*, 1929, XXVII, p. 689). A new highly popular sport had emerged.

This brief account of sporting practice in Colombia clearly indicates that a substantial number of disciplines were available to the citizenry at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sports covered the national territory in both urban and rural settings, and involved all social strata, albeit certain sports disciplines retained strong class and regional accents. A dense web of formal and informal organizations bent on recognition through competition characterizes the field of sports in Colombia during the 1920s. Once again, schools and social clubs take the center stage, but ties of friendship and solidarity also explain the emergence of sporting practice in the country. As the decade went by, the government intervened to organize sporting events and introduce technical expertise to administer the games.

4. Government policy and sports competitions

Reporting on the manner in which sports developed in the United States, *Cromos* underlined the importance that the nation attached to this activity. Of special interest to the reporter was the manner in which U. S. governments intervened to regulate sports and create public spaces where sporting activities could take place and become available to all (*Cromos*, 1924, p. 412).

In this context, Law 80 of 1925 created the National Commission on Physical Education in charge of organizing annual national athletic competitions, building sports facilities (*plazas de deportes*), and creating incentives for associations dedicated to the promotion of “physical culture”. To this end, the Commissioners were to devise a coordinated sports system of local and foreign associations to obtain “uniformity of action and methods”. Extending the practice of sports among the population entailed organizing public conferences as well as publishing specialized sports magazines and books. Further, funding of sport through donations from regional governments, businesses, and private citizens gave this undertaking a distinct decentralized and private sector flavor.

Among the three Commissioners appointed by the government one of them was required to have "technical knowledge" and, it was determined, would receive a substantial monthly salary of six hundred pesos.

Law 80 also stressed the need to develop a compulsory physical education plan for primary, secondary and university level programs.⁴ Accordingly, the National Physical Education Section of the Ministry of Public Instruction was created and a Director appointed with a monthly salary of one hundred and fifty Colombian pesos. The Director was to organize intensive courses for educators who would be in charge of the sports facilities. In connection to such sites, the Director's role included drawing the construction plans and regulating the subsequent use of the sports facilities.

This statute also created Physical Education Commissions in every department in charge of the organization of athletic competitions, the promotion of associations for physical culture, calling for donations, and promoting sports through conferences. The Governors appointed the regional Commissioners, and the departmental Assemblies decided on the building of sports facilities in their jurisdictions and provided the funds required for their construction. Law 80 provided that municipalities with more than twenty thousand inhabitants were to build at least one sporting facility.

The center of gravity of sports policy was the development and construction of sports facilities and the organization of athletic competitions. The organization of future games became a matter of public discussion. Plinio Medina believed performance in sports could improve if law mandated local incentives in cash for athletic accomplishments. He also suggested that preliminary municipal and regional games take place in order to select the best athletes to compete in the national games. Hence, the Colombian Olympics would result in a number of sporting competitions between the departmental delegations. An autonomous central board was to organize and regulate the games, as would regional boards in each department (*Cromos*, 1927, XVIII, p. 569).

⁴ Students were required to practice gymnastic exercises in the sports facilities; gathering anthropometric information on each student participating in sporting activities became mandatory.

In the Colombian regions, Cundinamarca organized its version of the Olympic Games in 1928 followed by Cali in January 1929. The Cali games not only presented local teams and athletes, but also featured competitors from other departments in the country (*Cromos*, 1929, XXI, p. 641).

Prior to the opening of the 1927 Colombian Olympics, Guillermo Manrique Terán stated that Colombian sport was no longer an elite phenomenon but a popular event: “The cycle of warrior sports [is over]. A new sporting [mentality] has taken over the country” (*Cromos*, 1927, XVIII, p. 562). As the 1927 games came to a close Dr. Mirabel reported twenty five thousand spectators in attendance such that the stadium capacity became insufficient: “Now the games acquired a permanent and definitive foundation” (*Cromos*, 1927, XVIII, p. 568).

For the first time in its history in the second half of the decade, Colombia organized a durable institutional system for sports. A centralized sports commission and its regional parts were developed as directing bodies; the government’s mission was defined in terms of building sports facilities, organizing national and regional games, and promoting public and private cooperation toward the preparation of the athletes. Technical expertise in sports gradually became a valued commodity.

Conclusion

Sports developed as an integral part of Colombia’s drive towards modernity of the 1920s. This process is best understood as a complex pattern of formal and informal interaction and learning, rather than a linear path of transference of European sporting practice to the Latin American elites. Rather than emerging from massive migration flows or from elite social clubs, one can better understand Colombia’s sporting history in terms of the interconnected geographies of sports and the circulation of persons, ideas, and techniques. Structural and political constraints deriving from Colombia’s early twentieth century history conspire against this “diffusion” pattern of sports. Rampant disease and civil war lead to low life expectancy. Children and young people suffered from illness and poverty. Under those stringent conditions, the outlook for sports was faint.

To overcome this situation governments and social organizations sought to change the peoples’ habits, among which daily baths and the enjoyment

of the outdoors were shared values. At any rate, government response to public sanitation problems was weak and health care policies developed at a slow pace during the decade.

Colombia was not a country of choice for immigrants nor was policy suited to attract them. Further, Colombians travelling abroad were few. The country's weak infrastructure and frail economy limited the opportunities for travel even within the country. Hence, the migratory flows can hardly explain the introduction of modern sports through foreign communities settling in Colombia.

This is not to say that Colombians were fully isolated from the world. European immigrants in the country and their kin were enthusiastic supporters of sports. A few Colombian travelers abroad also learned from sports; upon their return they inspired their friends to engage in such sporting activities and eventually formed clubs to support them. Local awareness of sporting contests throughout the world became widespread as telecommunications brought citizens closer to foreign competition.

Priests from Catholic Orders engaged with the nation's education introduced gymnastics and sports and built sporting facilities that became widely used to stage events and competitions. Confessional and non-confessional liberal schools played a key role in the expansion of sport. Local charities and social groups, including student and workers organizations also promoted physical exercise and sport.

Gymnastics complied with the Latin dictum *mens sana in corpore sano*, an avenue to obtain physical as well as mental well-being. Mostly German educators taught calisthenics and Swedish gymnastics including them in the school curricula. Schools of higher learning for educators (*Normales*) provided teachers specialized training in physical education, thus opening new professional opportunities.

Spectator sports included traditional and popular sports as well as modern sports embracing all social segments. Nevertheless, some sports, such as polo, golf or car racing acquired a strong class accent. Further, everywhere in the nation one finds the imprint of traditional and modern sports, although regional preferences are clearly visible. At any rate, sports present themselves as a socially inclusive practice including ethnic and gender groups, despite the fact that not all sports were available to all.

Governments took on a symbolic role in legitimizing sports during the 1920s as evidenced by the Presidents' frequent attendance in sporting

events and presenting the winners trophies. Social recognition in the media and local prestige were available for sportspersons, a key social innovation of the period.

As sports gained a wide audience, governments intervened to organize national games, provide technical assistance, and build sporting facilities. In this sense, the governments defined a long-lasting policy-making role in sports. Private sponsorship of sport was highly valued and actively pursued by government officials. Regional sports organizations and local government participation became a building block for the social expansion of sports.

New sporting events - among which the participation in the Olympic Games was paramount - massive interest in the games, as well as the development of the technical aspects of the sports disciplines, including their anthropological and medical implications, seemed to define the agenda for the future Liberal reformist governments of the 1930s.

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