

## British sport in POW camps during World War II

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### ABSTRACT

While doing research on the subject not related to sport Author came across, in the diaries of the British officers kept in the POWs camps during the Second World War, the accounts of sports and other recreational activities played there.

Sport in such camps played an obvious role of maintaining a psychological as well as biological balance. It could also, thanks to the spectacularity of the exercises, help to mask preparations for escape and was treated by the soldiers as a kind of a moral duty, e.g. a classic example of a vaulting box taken outside the camp barracks and containing sacks filled with sand and debris from the underground passages dug in the camps, taken out to scatter it on the assembly ground.

Sport served not only as a survival technique though but it was also an archival record of great importance, on the one hand enriching the universal character of sports and on the other hand being an interesting and forgotten aspect of the war but also a feature of the human nature performing in a difficult historical circumstances.

The role of sports tradition and the activities of the imprisoned British should be researched the more so that in many cases it was the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth citizens who were the main promoters of such kind of human activity.

The presentation in question is to bring up the issue and does not lay claim to exhaust the topic. By referring to a few though typical examples taken from the memoirs of the Commonwealth citizens (not only the British) I just want to signal the problem and the need for further historical research on it.

### KEY WORDS

sport of World War II, POW camps, sport of prisoners of war.

Sport has been an indispensable human companion: "From the dawn of human civilization, it seems, the need for some form of sporting physical recreation has been almost as imperative to human beings as the need to procreate, work and eat" [1: 1]. In the British context this acquires even more special meaning as the United Kingdom is the homeland of numerous sports or their rules of the game. The sporting spirit would be present even in the periods of greatest emergency. It e.g. permeated the battle grounds of WWI as "war for any other name is just another British game"<sup>1</sup> [2, p. 45; 3, p. 124]. Physical activity before wars produced better soldiers. Apart from bodily strength also sports tactics became useful. British troops

would, e.g. use skills developed while playing cricket to throw grenades [4]<sup>2</sup>. A similar situation was with football, in which "a ball was kicked over the parapet of the trench to initiate a British attack against the German trenches" and thus creating "trench football" [3, p. 129]. Thus, the battle field became a sports pitch and it would be emphasized that "the individual superiority of the Briton over the Hun is due to [British] natural love for sports"<sup>3</sup>[5, p. 292; 1, p. 58]. The Islanders were also successful at their national sports' promotion among their opponents. It was football which was played in WWI trenches between the British and the Germans during a temporary truce on the Christmas Day of 1914<sup>3</sup>. Prior to the First World War, it was rugby which

<sup>1</sup> "[S]till a game is played, crueller and bloodier and on a larger scale, yet preserving all the marks of sportsmanship ..." [3, p. 124].

<sup>2</sup> Poems were written about it, e.g. *The Cricketers of Flanders*, "show[ing] how sporting prowess was juxtaposed with prowess on the battle field" and "[it] demonstrate[ed] how the public judged the makings of a man by the way he played a game of cricket" [4].

<sup>3</sup> "The soldiers sang Christmas carols before leaving their trenches to play a match in sub-zero temperatures in no-man's land near Armentières, France. The Germans won 3-2, according to some soldiers, and the truce gradually came to an end in the same way it had begun – by mutual consent". At: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_news/4123107.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_news/4123107.stm).

was the favourite pastime sport in British POW camps for Boers (1899-1902 Anglo-Boer War). In the words of Floris J.G. van der Merwe [6], "The irony of this early push in South African rugby development is that whilst hating and fighting the 'Tommies' [touring Tommy Smythe's British team], these Boer prisoners truly loved their opponents' rugby and within decades even claimed it as their own 'national game'". During WWII soccer was one of the means to win over the enemy and to show resistance despite consequences like e.g. in the so called "death game" of 1942 in which the Ukrainian team of former POWs FC Start played successfully against German Flakelf team in Kiev.

Since the Geneva Convention 1929 recommended sports in POW camps, physical exercises also entered the latter's enclosed territories<sup>4</sup>. The importance of sport performed in captivity has been reflected in literature in numerous articles, diaries, novels but also movies – documentaries and feature films. This generous output is usually tinted with personal or fictitious impressions and varies in its artistic and documented value. There is no thorough monographic study based on reliable data. And the latter is quite impressive since it concerns sport practiced in over 600 POW camps scattered all over Europe. This also relates to the role of British soldiers and officers particularly active, in comparison to other nationalities, in this field and this comes as no surprise since they are the representatives of the homeland of modern sport and the sports spirit has been an integral part of British tradition and culture.

This article does not aim to exhaust the topic since the author is not a sports historian but an English scholar who came across the topic in question while doing research on Polish-British relations during WWII. The purpose is rather to signal the importance and scale of the phenomenon which has fairly efficiently eluded bigger and complex historical studies so far.

At the outset, let us address an issue that one may bear in mind here and which is about the moral justification for doing sports in camps when outside WWII was taking its toll. In other words, how to account for "playing games while humanity was crucified" [7, p. 217]. WWI POW and social scientist J. Davidson Ketchum touches upon this resorting to the words of another inmate who in a letter to his family wrote: "One doesn't have much heart for games, but they are good exercise, and it is our duty to keep fit, I suppose" (*ibid.*). Ketchum refers to it as instinctive knowledge of what is good for us: "The prisoners were no social scientists, but they did spontaneously, as so often before, just what the situation demanded" (*ibid.*). The "keeping fit" argument was related not only to physical but also, or maybe first and foremost, to the psychological wellbeing. Sporting activity, triggered by binding legal regulations, together with other

recreational activities had a soothing effect on prisoners, to a considerable extent counteracting the reality of a camp life which on the whole was "frustrating, uncertain, boring [especially for those who did not work outside] and depressing" [8]. Eating and sleeping in the same room, rethinking the reasons which brought them to captivity and pondering on their own fate could have a destructive effect on one's psycho. The more so that "one [saw] himself as the 'forgotten man', abandoned by his country and despised by his captors [9].

The introduction of sport in POW camps was a gradual process though<sup>5</sup>. With the exception of Boer POWs mentioned before, physical recreation was unknown in such camps until WWI. The main obstacles were the ignorance about the benefits of it as well as the lack of formal agreements on that issue. The Hague Convention of 1907 changed this with its demand for humane treatment of prisoners. Consequently, sport made its way to WWI. The Geneva Convention popularized sports even more. However, access to them was easier in Allied camps for Axis soldiers. As to German POW camps, physical activity was more frequent a phenomenon in prisons for officers (*Offizierslager*) than for ordinary troops (*Stalags*), the more so the latter were exhausted from work which together with insufficient food intake could make physical effort less common. By imposing hard labour and life conditions the Japanese excluded sports from their prisons. There was no sport whatsoever in the Soviet interment camp for Polish officers at Katyn, murdered in spring 1940. The Soviets, on the other hand, were ill-treated by the Germans which prevented them from any kind of recreation. The situation of Poles and other allies was much better. Cancelled due to the war, 1944 Olympic games were held, with the agreement of the Germans, in the camp mainly for Polish officers – *Oflag IIC at Dobiegniew (Ger. Woldenberg)*, with several hundred inmates taking part in them. A part of it was a literary Olympic contest. In much more difficult circumstances, 1940 Underground "Olympic Games" were also organized in *Stalag XIII C in Nuremberg-Langwasser*. Disciplines represented there "included frog jumping, stone throwing, archery, high jump over barbed wire, and cycling on a hidden bicycle placed on a podium". International contestants did not forget about literary accents either, thus "providing a tragic and piercing document of the time". The POWs were very creative in producing necessary objects. Barbed wired pennants were awarded to the winners and potatoes served as the material to make the Olympic stamp. Apart from, among others, recreation and being a guardian of physical strength, sport acted as a cover for escape attempts. E.g. a vaulting box, was used to conceal the activity of digging escape tunnels underneath it<sup>6</sup>. This "marriage" of sport and escapes to freedom in POW camps

<sup>4</sup> Chapter 3, Art. 13. (...) They shall have facilities for engaging in physical exercises and obtaining the benefit of being out of doors; Chapter 4, Art. 17. belligerents shall encourage as much as possible the organization of intellectual and sporting pursuits by the prisoners of war.

<sup>5</sup> Information which follows is taken from W. Lipoński [10], *World Sports Encyclopedia*, UNESCO, Paris-Poznań 2003, pp. 433-434 unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>6</sup> Jerzy Gozdek [11] describes it in detail in his article, „Skrzynia gimnastyczna. Ucieczki do wolności (2)” [A Vaulting Box. Escapes to Freedom], *Wprost*. Bernard Karol Buchwald, a Polish pilot veteran who spent a few years (1942-1945) in Żagań (Germ. Sagan) POW camp – *Stalag Luft III*, interviewed by the author of this article Joanna Witkowska adds, sports games were played on purpose to divert German guards' attention (the Germans often could not help watching sports) from escape attempts.

is the underlying motif of the film *Escape to Victory* from 1981 directed by John Huston and starring famous footballers, among others, the Brazilian Edison "Edson" Arantes do Nascimento known as Pele, Bobby Moore, Sylvester Stallone and the Pole Kazimierz Deyna<sup>7</sup>.

The importance of sports activity is emphasized by the prisoners themselves in their memoirs. One of them was born in New Zealand, a doctor, John Borrie (1915-2006). In 1939 he became a captain in his country's Army Medical Corps in the Middle East, then he was moved to Greece and captured by the Germans there in 1941. Until the end of the war the medical officer remained in captivity in central Europe (1941-1944 in Łambinowice [Germ. Lamsdorf], today Kędzierzyn-Koźle, Upper Silesia, Poland). By his negotiations with the Germans he contributed to the improvement of the POWs conditions. He was honoured for his wartime achievements with the MBE, the 1939-1945 Star, Africa Star, and New Zealand War Service Medal [13]<sup>8</sup>. In his diary *Despite Captivity. A doctor's Life as Prisoner of War*, he equated recreation with necessities such as "food, clothing, shelter, medicine" [15, p. 75]. In such context sport was crucial to keep mental health: "Doctors helped run entertainment, sport and religious services, sustaining camp morale" (ibid.). Thus, nothing could stop the POWs from immersing in the invigorating power of activity for which they seemed to use every opportunity: "Once outside the camp gates, they literally raced along the road [...], guards' lugging rifles and bayonets being left far behind" [15, p. 122]. Sport became something worth fighting for even if this was to be mere walking: "Although under the Geneva Convention medical personnel may exercise each week, our many requests for walks were only granted on 6 August – 3½ months after capture. Having first signed an agreement not to attempt to escape or talk to Greek civilians and to return by 6 pm, twelve officers were taken on an escorted walk" [15, p. 49-50] or if the prize was swimming in a pool of water: "We persuaded our guard to let us swim in a large dredge hole across the fields" [15, p. 114]. Winter season offered the chance to engage in a new selection of activities like ice-hockey. Although it required a lot of effort since prisoners themselves had to remove snow and pour gallons of water in the area which was to be an ice-rink, the task was rewarding: "In those wintry days of snow, ice and biting cold, we had more exercise than ever before" [15, p. 207].

Another diarist proving the merit of exercising was a British army officer, Patrick R. Reid (1910-1990) [16]. In 1940 he was imprisoned in a Castle in Colditz near Leipzig (Oflag IV-C), where notorious Allied escapees were held. Escape-proof qualities like the location of the Castle (top of a cliff

and 640 kilometers distance from friendly territory), thick walls (2 metres), the barbed-wire encirclement, a high number of guards and the searchlights proved too weak as the place witnessed actually more successful escape attempts than less secure prison camps<sup>9</sup> [17, 18]. Reid described his POW experiences in a bestseller *The Colditz Story* (1952). Unsurprisingly, the feelings of unhappiness, repression, tension and frustration accompanied the captives. Scarcity of food, boring routine or German propaganda rendered lives unpleasant. Short moments of satisfaction coming with, e.g. the consumption of rare delicacies ("corned beef fried with dried currants or sultans") "warded off many an incipient depression" [16, p. 93]. Other uplifting circumstances would include finding a lost camp pet-cat, enjoying "a peaceful and calming influence" of snow and, naturally, the news of German failures on the front [16, pp. 97, 189]. On a daily basis it was recreation which brought undisputable relief. Allied POWs played instruments, learnt languages, acted in the theatre and, of course, did sports. The latter became an integral part of the camp life routine and usually dominated afternoons. Reid describes a whole array of activities; special attention being given to the game called "stoolball". It was said to be typically British and belonging to the same group of sports as the Eton wall game<sup>10</sup>. "The Colditz variety" of the latter, as the officer put it, received its name from the stools occupied by "goalies". Each of the two opposing teams was supposed to keep the ball running and bounce it from time to time before finally touching the stool with a ball to score a goal. Although without major accidents, the matches were usually quite violent – those who possessed the ball could do anything to save it. As a result crashes, pulling the opponent's scalp or leg and torn clothes were common occurrence, everything accompanied with loud shouts and the supporters' cheering. Unwritten "fair play" rules were followed. E.g. "tripping" was out of question. To enable the game, spectators would, out of their own will, leave the courtyard free for the stoolballers and watch the matches from their room windows. Soon it was proven sport did not know any barriers between countries as the Poles and the French, the most faithful fans, finally became players themselves [16, pp. 98-99]. However, this is what the British disapproved of on the grounds of these nationalities' violation of the noble idea of sport – to play for pleasure rather than in the pursuit of victory: "They eventually put up sides against the British and games were played against them, but these were not a success. Tempers were lost and the score became a matter of importance, which it never did in an 'all British' game" [16, p. 99]. Hence, sport was also a transmitter of messages on cultural differences. Similarly to the Poles

<sup>7</sup> "As allied POWs prepare for a soccer game against the German National Team to be played in Nazi-occupied Paris, the French Resistance and British officers are making plans for the team's escape" [12].

<sup>8</sup> His son Michel Borrie, a doctor himself, came to Poland from Canada on 17th March 2009. He visited the places of his father's incarceration and met the inhabitants of Kędzierzyn-Koźle [14].

<sup>9</sup> One of the attempts, initiated by four Britons (Bill Goldfinch, Anthony Rolt, Jack Best and Stooze Wardle) was to flee flying a glider. Liberation of the camp on 16th April 1945 did not allow to test this idea out.

<sup>10</sup> "(...) the first recorded game was in 1766. The field of play is a fairly narrow strip, about five metres wide, running alongside a not quite straight brick wall (...) and about 110 metres from end to end. (...) each side tries to get the ball down to the far end and then score. Players are not allowed to handle the ball, not allowed to let any part of their bodies except feet and hands touch the ground, not allowed to strike or hold their opponents, and there are also exceedingly strict 'offside' rules (no passing back and no playing in front); apart from that, almost anything goes" [19].

and the French, German guards would not be indifferent to the enjoyment the games offered. With time prisoners were able to negotiate moving beyond the Castle courtyard which allowed them to play the game similar to soccer. The Germans, even at the cost of revealing their "spying positions", could not help watching the matches:

As time went on, the Jerries allowed us a couple of hours' exercise three times a week in a barbed-wire pen in the wooded grounds below the Castle, but within the external castle walls. Here we played something resembling soccer – the hazards were the trees amongst which the game surged backwards and forwards. Our ball games amused the Jerries. Officers and N.C.O.s [non-commissioned officers] were occasionally caught watching them surreptitiously – not because they were afraid of being seen as spectators, but because their vantage-points were supposed to be secret and were used for spying upon us [16, p. 99].

Other popular sports which POWs had to make do with due to space restrictions were a kind of volleyball, "that is to say, a football pushed backwards and forwards over a high badminton net with about three players on each side", as well as fencing and boxing [16, pp. 97-98]. As to individual sports performances, abnormal prison reality would push some to the extremes. The captain mentions "athletic types" who "ran around the compound for hours on end", "walked as if the devil was after them" or "did physical jerks and acrobatics, appearing to stand on their hands for more hours per day than on their feet" [15, p. 43]. The end of the day gave way to mind sports:

In our less energetic moments, especially in the evenings, we played bridge and chess. Chess games, in a community where the passage of time was of no importance, went on for days. Players were known to sit up all night with a homemade, foul-smelling oil-lamp (for the electricity was turned off). The light had to be shaded so as not to show through the windows and bring the Jerries in [16, p. 102].

Borrie also points to the popularity of bridge which in his camp was played almost round the clock. Determination to learn the game and win made some inmates early birds, the more so if they could be taught by experts in the field:

In these monotonous times most officers had fallen victims to Bridge, for Johnny Fulton, an all-England player, held school each afternoon and evening. Rubbers were played before and after breakfast, lunch and dinner, while the keenest even rose at 6 am to learn conventions, calls, honour tricks and slamming techniques [15, p. 53].

The exercises, apart from contributing to the welfare of their physical body, influenced the inner being of the prisoners of war. They were a substitute for the freedom they did not have and craved for. In other words, sport became a time machine which took them to different, dreamt of reality and although the author referred to stoolball with its lack of heavily imposed rules, it does not seem to be an

exaggeration to assume that this could be said about the role of sports in the camp in general:

I realize now this game was a manifestation of our suppressed desire for freedom. While the game was in action we were free. The surrounding walls were no longer a prison but the confines of the game we played, and there were no constraining rules to curtail our freedom of action. I always felt much better after a game. Followed by a cold bath it put me on top of the world [16, p. 99].

Taking a scientific perspective, Ketchum [7] notices that sport was a tool which helped soldiers, "snatched out of one social world" to create another one within the constraints of the prison premises. With the "ritual and ceremony" it involved it played a psychological role being "a key in the camp's system of defences" [7, p. 229]. In this "substitute world" it was not so much the act of physical activity itself which had a protective function but "the fact that they [captives] were playing their roles in a social world that had become as real and absorbing as that outside" (ibid.).

Interestingly enough for the author of the article, Reid refers to Polish-British encounters several times. Apart from the already mentioned stoolball matches, he recalls that Poles taught the POWs card games. Called "Gapin", it was so "aggravating" and "exasperating" it could drive a wedge even between friends "because of humiliation and wounded pride". The memoirist himself admits the game was so captivating that he was involved in a "Gapin Contest" with his friend Rupert Barry. Unluckily for him, he had to pay Rupert "a fat cheque" right after the war [16, p. 102]. On another occasion the British officer praised Poles for their abilities to speak languages. Actually, well-educated Polish officers could know several languages like German, French and Russian. This is because before 1918 they lived in Poland partitioned among Russia, Prussia and Austria. They worked as clerks, had to serve in the oppressors' armies so they learnt the language automatically. When Poland became independent again (1918) they were taught two foreign languages in schools. French was popular because of good Polish-French relations. It was also the language of diplomacy. Hence Reid's statement: "The Poles knew every language imaginable between them". For the British it was the opportunity to learn language skills as well. E.g. in return for French they offered Poles English lessons. One can find hilarious description of the latter in the diary [16, pp. 93-94]. Finally, Polish officers could also be helpful with work on escape routes giving lessons on how to open a lock:

(...) we concentrated on parts of the Castle not used by ourselves. Our debut was made early in January 1941 in a room on the ground floor under German lock and key. We were learning from the Poles their art of picking locks, and in this empty room, with our usual guards on the look-out for alarms, we started work [16, p. 103].

If one believes A.J. Evans (*The Escape Club*) who, as the author of the bestseller mentions, "said that escaping is the greatest sport in the world" [Evans, p. 17] then this



“sport” became a part of Reid’s experience as he successfully escaped from Colditz in 1942, together with three other compatriots (Major Ronald B. Littledale, Lieutenant-Commander William E. Stephens, and Flight Lieutenant Howard D. Wardle): “They slipped through the camp kitchens into the German yard, into the Kommandatur cellar and down to a dry moat through the park. They split into two pairs. Reid and Wardle took four days to reach Switzerland, Littledale and Stephens took five” [20].

The movie *The Colditz Story* based on his book *Colditz. The Colditz Story* (1952, published in London by London: Hodder and Stoughton) was made in 1955 (dir. by Guy Hamilton and John Mills playing Reid), followed in 1972 (till 1974) by the British TV series.

Sport could serve multiple functions in POW camps. Although many of them were not different from peaceful time purposes, yet in the period of extreme emergency their potential grew substantially saving bodies and minds. That sports maintained the physical well-being is out of question. So is the mental relief it gave by triggering fun, joy and relaxation. Total immersion in it gave a refuge and not only a promise of freedom but the actual feeling of it. For a while a player could believe that something was under his control and that he could influence the reality. Apart from its impact on an individual, the physical activity aided maintaining the group (prisoners’) morale. On a national level it helped to keep peoples’ identity (e.g. when it showed “British and non-British way of playing stoolball”). Paradoxically, the latter also showed the universal and uniting character of sport. Different nationalities would engage in the same activity and, what is more, felt welcome to participate in sports earlier unknown to them. The liberating power of sport could also be experienced on a physical level when facilities used to perform it became “a smokescreen for the real endeavors of the prisoners”, i.e. preparation for an escape from the camp.

This neglected aspect of the British sport in POW camps needs more researchers’ attention as an archival record of great importance. It shows a new dimension of physical activity, a feature of the human nature performing in difficult historical circumstances all of which may contribute to the enrichment of sports and war history. What is more, in many cases it was the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth citizens who were the main promoters of such kind of human activity. This in turn points to the outstanding cultural role and strength of the British sport. But the prestige of the latter has been worked out for years and tested in many battlefields. As Uwe Zagratzki [3] pointed out, the “Play the game” motto from the poem *Vitai Lampada* [They Pass On The Torch of Life] by Henry Newbolt (1862-1938) in which his “belief in the values inculcated in the public schools”, among others “the virtues of good sportsmanship, and ‘playing the game’ (whether in life or in battle)” is expressed will return in R. Caton Woodville’s picture “The Surreys Play the Game” [3, pp. 129-130; 4].<sup>11</sup> The latter was a response to the conduct of the 8th Battal-

ion East Surrey Regiment during the Battle of the Somme (1<sup>st</sup> July 1916) when the Regiment soldiers attacked the German positions dribbling the footballs given to them by their captain W.P. Nevill [21]. These were not isolated cases. Similar tactics of combat during the Great War were used by the 17th Battalion Middlesex Regiment consisting of footballers. In 2008, the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WWI, a book titled *When the Whistle Blows. The Story of the Footballers’ Battalion in the Great War* came out presenting the story of the battalion. All these sample instances illustrate the universal spirit of the British sport, its potential to pervade all spheres of life.

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<sup>11</sup> In J. Davidson Ketchum’s [7] *Ruhleben. A Prison Camp Society* even instructions related to keeping cleanliness and tidiness in a camp are referred to by the captain of the camp as “Play(ing) the Game” [1965: 294].

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