

Traditional Sports and Games in the Modern Societies

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General Introduction

This article has been written from the perspective of more than 25 year of practice with and promotion of Traditional Sports and Games (TSG) in Denmark. The author's CV: Lars Hazelton has an educational background in TSG from Gerlev, and has worked closely together with researcher and historian Jørn Møller since the beginning of the 1990ties. Employed at Gerlev in 1995, he participated in developing the Gerlev Playpark, including the course- and project part of the institution. Initiator and project leader of several large TSG projects, he is represented in several national and international TSG networks.

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Why should TSG be promoted and what can TSG bring to modern societies?

In the project "Recall: Games of the Past – Sports for Today" led by TAFISA and co-funded by the European Commission, one of the important questions is why TSG should be promoted today and what TSG can bring to modern society?

What are Traditional Sport and Games (TSG)?

The question about what identifies Traditional Sports and Games (TSG) is hard to give an exact answer to. In this article we will identify TSG as the physical culture of Sports and Games that are derived from the original pre-industrial society. TSG in our understanding is sport & games from the time before the modern Olympic Sport was invented, as the global movement that has been dominating in the twentieth century.

(Read more about the identity of TSG in the article "History and cultural context of TSG in selected European countries")

TSG are an old physical and social culture - and can now be a part of a new active-body-culture

Some of the TSG take years to master: the movement, the equipment and the rules of the games are reflecting highly specialized skills and control of the human body.

But TSG can also be simple TSG, involve play and games that are easy to perform. Simple TSG have for centuries been a part of the traditional body-culture in pre-industrial societies. Especially forms of child's play are often neglected and are assumed to be unimportant. This could not be more wrong (Joern Moeller, Gerlev Playpark, Denmark).

In the past, play was something adults did, play was not reserved for children. Games were a natural part of adult life, after work, for anniversaries, holidays, in celebration of life events (eg. weddings) and to mark the season. The European cultural history is full of examples of adults playing games of tag, ball-games, fights of strength and flexibility, games involving socializing, song and dance and games that involving teasing. An example of the latter might involve a blindfold or teasing and making fun of each individual in the group. (Jørn Møller, Gerlev Playpark, Denmark)

These simple TSG do not require special physical skills and equipment; they are based on simple physical movements, simple rules and general customs and human social manners. They are easy to participate in for the common man and require only cheap equipment. These simple forms of TSG offer a fun, simple and social approach to physical activity.

These many positive qualities that are a characteristic of the simple forms of TSG are well known from the practice in the Danish Playpark at the Gerlev Sports Academy. Gerlev Playpark holds experience from more than 30 years of educational work with TSG, has spread beyond Denmark and has an international collaboration on the dissemination of the simple forms of TSG (www.gerlev.dk and www.gerlevlegepark.dk).

TSG in their simplest form bridge the gap between us

The general prediction all over the globe is that more and more people are moving to live in big cities. Many will be the first generation of urban residents and come from different cultures, from the nation's countryside or emigrants from other nations. TSG will resonate from their original culture, and because of the fundamental similarities in all TSG they could act as the "meeting place" for the "new neighbors in the world's great cities." TSG in their simplest form can nowadays facilitate involvement in physical, social activity and local culture.

TSG in their simplest form can easily be adapted to the present groups that want to play. In this aspect TSG are cross-generational, cross gender, and can be played across ethnic groups and abilities. TSG are a part of a good active life-quality in modern urban soundings and provide opportunities and contexts for families and friends to spend together in healthy exercise.

TSG can in many forms be transformed to fit with people with poor experience and abilities. Simple TSG can offer fun and low cost activities. In a popular form one can say - *TSG in the simplest form fits all in all sizes.*

TSG and health

The modern urban way of life can lack space for physical activity. This trend threatens public health not only in the West but also in many developing countries. There is an urgent need for more body and movement to break the cycle of physical inactivity. While modern sport may be the answer for many, TSG offer a broader, low cost and fun way to improve healthful physical activity. TSG can be adapted and played through lifetime with peers and/or across generations.

TSG constitute part of the answer to the serious challenges that our modern societies are facing with the physical inactivity crisis: for the first time and if nothing is changed, the upcoming generation are expected to have a shorter life than their parents! It is the duty of every one to create early positive experiences for children and integrate physical activity into the everyday life. For more information, please consult www.designedtomove.org.

TSG on an inter-personal level:

- TSG are a link for the young to the older generation.
- TSG help us to live in society – many TSG are not about the winner, the number 1, but are about socializing a group to function and work together...
- Games cannot be forced – joining is done on a voluntary basis.
- TSG can integrate family, friends, and colleagues on a workplace, neighborhood, and generations.
- TSG in some forms can open our minds.

TSG on a practical level:

- TSG use a simple local basis for the activity.
- TSG are simply and easily accessed.
- TSG tools are easily made locally and more often than not cheaply
- TSG often fit the local climate and topography.
- TSG sometimes fit the people in the region's bodies and body culture.
- TSG reflect the local traditional imaginative customs, dress and religion.

Can TSG promote themselves?

No – is the simple answer to that question.

One of the very positive things about TSG is that they are simple, local and cheap to do. The second thing about TSG is that if they are very interesting for the participants in the games, the common man does not practice on a level that make TSG interesting to watch for the large audience – there is a lack of drama and TSG have no attraction on the big media.

TSG cannot promote themselves in competition with the modern and Olympic sports. Like many other parts of our culture, TSG need support to survive and to develop into modern times. If this support is neglected mankind will suffer from the loss of a cultural variation and from all the positive aspects of TSG as part of Sport for All and active living.

Play and games are not just historical forerunners, but independent contributions to modern bodily self-determination, different from standardized competitive sport. On the international level, this has been expressed especially by the Council of Europe and by UNESCO. The UNESCO Conference of Sport Ministers – MINEPS – in Athens, 2004, announced the wish to

“encourage the promotion and development of traditional games and sports by an international charter as elements of sport for all and an expression of the world’s rich and diverse cultural heritage.” (UNESCO 2004)

If the variety of play and games represents the common wealth of the people of the world, each reduction is a threat against all. That is why, corresponding to biodiversity as a value for the survival of life, one has talked about ‘ludodiversity’ as the value of play and games for the survival of culture: “Vive la difference!” (Renson in Pfister 2004). Ethnomotricity (the cultural value of movement in play and game) and ludic diversity (the value of diversity in play and game) give new impulses to education through movement.

TSG need support in time of transition from the body-culture of the old villages and farming communities to be an alternate physical culture in the world's big cities, in alliance with the many alternative cultures of body and movement that occurs in the cities.

There are many different ways of playing TSG, and we can change and mix them in the development of new forms of TSG – traditions are inspiration not a jail (Lars Hazelton, Gerlev Palypark, Denmark).

If we want to develop new-TSG, we have to take the following into consideration...

A model for development of the New-TSG:

- Focus on the aspect of movement in every TSG: in play, dance, fight, ball-games, the equipment used and skill;
- Make sure new TS are open to beginners as well as experts;
- Make use of options for different ways to be involved, from the simplest way of playing to the most complex skills;
- Make sure players understand the game and its cultural background and history;
- Determine the level that TSG is to be played at – must participation involve local, national or world TSG-organizations? Must organizations be involved at all or can it be informal?

In this spirit, a new approach towards traditional games was tried in Denmark from the mid-1980s. Following some inspirations from the wave of New Games of the ‘Californian’ type, old village games from the Danish tradition were ‘rediscovered’, and people studied their history, partial disappearance and educational values. This resulted in a re-emerging play and game education and the establishment of the Gerlev Playpark, which never stopped growing ever since (Møller 1984, 1990/91, 1997 and 2010; Source: 1 Eichberg)

New-TSG in the modern big cities:

New-TSG make life in big cities “green”:

- TSG are natural in movement and often require no special facilities or equipment: the player’s own body is the main tool.
- TSG use local spaces and materials available locally to play
- TSG support regional and local cultures and unites us cross-culturally. It may look different on the surface, but the inner structure of the game is often familiar and easy to understand.
- TSG give “life to the city”; when the inhabitants of the town use the public space for positive activities, they are not only promoting physical health, but also the social environment. In the city of Copenhagen, Denmark, you can see small parts of TSG in streets and parks – often together with new body-cultures like parkour and Crossfit or jogging in the parks.
- A city can arrange small play-spots all over its territory or be giant play-park for all.
- TSG can be mobilized to develop tourism in a very sustainable way, putting forward unique features of a city, region or country, as well as promoting their history and cultural background.
- TSG in the future also have the potential make some cities blue; for example the Gerlev Sports Academy’s Ship of Play will sail along the Danish coasts and bring TSG, physical activities and positive lifestyle to many of the Danish harbors for the next 4 summers (about 80% of the population live near to the sea and a harbor in Denmark).

TSG in new media & technology: – reaching the public

Special developmental possibilities may lie in the combination of games with new *media and technology*. In 2007-20011, an experimental project was started in the Gerlev Playpark, which had a background in co-operation between architects, toy producers, IT and robot research, landscape administration and the People’s Academy. The project “The virtual landscape” tried to combine traditional play and game with the world of mobile telephone technology, and bodily movement with virtual orientation (Pedersen 2009). The experimentation set the playing human body in relation to robot research, which was promoted at the University of Southern Denmark.

This way of innovation deserves, however, also some critical attention, as the technology approach in high degree comes top-down to the world of play, from industrial and educational interests rather than bottom-up from the playing human beings. The other way round, technological game design and computer games can also approach old games (Wilson 2011).

The Gerlev Playpark withdrew from the project in 2011 because of two reasons:

1. The technology was after several years still not optimal.
2. The physically active play was not encouraged, but was slowed down and the participants were seen as less dedicated compared to when the Games were mediated by a human instructor. Gerlev's current position is that the new media platforms are good at spreading information, but that the TSG primarily will be a physical meeting of minds & body.

In any case, traditional play and game deliver perspectives for innovations in-between the cultural genres. They challenge the established cultural habits and the sector-orientation of the dominating policies (Source 1: Eichberg). New media and technologies, provided they are well mobilized, could be of a great help to promote TSG in modern societies.

Source 1: Eichberg: Published in: EAST – East Asian Sports Thoughts, Taiwan, vol. 3 (2013) 115-137.

Another globality of sport: Towards a differential phenomenology of play and laughter

Prof. Henning Eichberg, University of Southern Denmark

Source 2: Eichberg: The Danish professor Henning Eichberg, Southern Danish University, is argue for this point in he's article: in the Danish book "Leg gør os til mennesker" (= Playing is what make us human, year: 2013)

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