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Sport in an Authoritarian Regime: The Primo de Rivera Era in Spain, 1923–30

Brian D. Bunk

The 1920s were part of Spanish literature’s Silver Age but for some of the nation’s athletes it was more of a Golden Age. The national football team won the silver medal at the 1920 Olympic games and in 1929 became the first team outside the United Kingdom to beat England. In 1926, heavyweight boxer Paulino Uzcudun claimed the European championship and tennis star Lili Alvarez began a run of three consecutive women’s singles finals at Wimbledon. Many of these sporting successes came during the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera who seized power in 1923. Studies of the Primo de Rivera regime (1923–30) have traditionally focused almost exclusively on politics and have generally neglected developments in society and culture. Such limited perspective led historian Pablo Montes to ask “Is the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera an era in which ‘nothing happened’?” Montes noted however that recent works by Eduardo Gonzaléz Calleja and Alejandro Quiroga have regarded the period as a key point in the nation’s transition to a mass society as well as an unsuccessful attempt at making a new state.¹ Scholars of fascism have generally considered the dictatorship to be a departure from previous military interventions in politics but without characteristics that made it truly fascist. Sociologist Michael Mann characterized the regime as “an idiosyncratic blend of semi-reactionary and corporatist authoritarianism” occupying a middle ground between old and new forms of authoritarianism.² Politically the dictatorship undermined the basis of the previous Liberal state without being able to replace it with something more permanent.³

Analyzing the dictatorship’s attitudes and actions toward sport helps illuminate the transitional nature of the regime and sheds light on how Spaniards considered the changing roles that sport could play in both national and international contexts. The government and other powerful voices in the country maintained an uneasy relationship with modern sport and unlike authoritarian regimes in Italy, Germany or Brazil, never attempted to fully organize, control or promote athletic activities beyond physical education programs. The dictatorship

seemed unwilling or unable to cast off previous attitudes toward sport despite adapting new models of statist intervention in other areas. Nevertheless, Primo de Rivera favored certain kinds of recreational activities, especially those traditionally associated with Spain and the upper classes along with those representing modernity and technical innovation such as motor sports and aviation. Modern spectator sports held less appeal since the government feared mass mobilization and the advanced and largely decentralized development of football as an industry made intervention and control less feasible than in other national contexts. Politicians and newspaper columnists outside the government acknowledged the value of sports both as a means of strengthening individual citizens and as an effective demonstration of national power yet often retained an increasingly outdated view separating physical education from modern mass sport. Such notions limited government intervention in sport and prevented the nation from effectively promoting itself through athletic success.

The Growth of Mass Sport

Historian Andrew McFarland has argued that the success of sport in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Spain was largely due to its popularity among the emerging urban middle classes. Activities like cycling and rural excursions allowed these groups to “replicate existing identities” through the consumption of goods and participation in activities deemed both modern and European. Regenerationists, intellectuals who sought to understand Spain’s problems in order to offer possible solutions, along with many in the medical community viewed physical education as an important component in the reconstruction of the country’s power and influence. Following the turn of the twentieth century sport became “a mark of progress and a quality of civilization” as growing numbers of urban businessmen began forming associations and clubs. Membership in such entities demonstrated economic and social status while also serving a variety of purposes including sponsoring cultural activities and as de facto political clubs. The economic growth spurred by World War I expanded the middle classes and even provided some workers with disposable income that could be spent on leisure activities that now included attending football matches.

6 McFarland, “The Importance of Reception,” op. cit., 537.
Nevertheless, many policy makers and intellectuals drew a sharp distinction between the medical and social benefits of physical education and the potentially negative impact of mass sports like football. Debates over the merits of physical education and its relation to newly emerging mass sports had occupied European thinkers for much of the twentieth century. Conservative scholars across the continent celebrated the moral and physical benefits of athletic activity but mourned what they viewed as its spiritual corruption during the modern age. In Spain belief in the restorative powers of physical education accelerated following the loss of its last overseas colonies in 1898 as many intellectuals felt that physical weakness had contributed to what they viewed as the country’s steady decline. Reformers pinpointed a variety of causes for the nation’s feebleness including rapid urbanization and an archaic educational system. The growth of publications advocating change and the establishment of organizations like the Federación Gimnástica Española [Spanish Gymnastic Federation] began efforts to rectify the problem.

The emphasis on gymnastics rather than sport and the belief in the physiological and moral value of physical education were common notions across Europe. Apart from the United Kingdom, the development of sport generally lagged behind gymnastics on much of the continent. World War I changed attitudes as the conflict became “the catalyst that transformed sport into a mass phenomenon of great social significance.” Many states became more active in regulating and promoting sport both within national borders and outside of them. Perhaps nowhere was the impact greater than in France. The interaction of Allied troops during the war led to the transmission of new sporting values and helped shift attitudes toward the potential uses and values of sport, among both the military leadership and frontline soldiers. Soon after the war the French state began to actively invest in sport as a means of restoring the image of the nation after the damage caused by

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7 John Hoberman, Sport and Political Ideology (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), esp. chap. 5.
war. In 1920 the government formed the Physical Education and Sports
Department, placing it under the control of the Ministry of Public Instruction. The
state also began using sport as a means of promoting national success abroad and
subsidized French participation in international athletic competitions including
spending 200,000 francs in support of the 1920 Olympic team.\(^\text{11}\) Although the
French were quick to link national pride to sporting success other nations around
the world soon followed suit.\(^\text{12}\) Spain’s neutrality in the war meant that it avoided
some of the positive and negative impacts that the conflict had on attitudes and
ideas regarding sport’s political usefulness both at home and abroad.

Into the 1920s, despite the growth of popular spectator sports in the country,
Spanish intellectuals from a variety of political viewpoints acknowledged the
potential benefits of sport both in strengthening its citizens and in presenting a
powerful image to the world. Despite recognizing the value of sport they continued
to uphold a strong distinction between physical education and modern mass sports.
Furthermore, like other European elites, many retained an idealized view of
sporting activity based on a British model, favoring gentleman’s activities
including hunting, fencing, tennis and motor sports over pastimes like football that
were more popular with the masses.\(^\text{13}\) Even in Catalonia, a region that heartily
embraced modern sport many cultural elites had a hard time accepting such
developments. In 1929 the Catalan Football Association announced a prize that
combined literature and sport but the contest was discontinued after the first year
due to lack of interest. When Catalan writers addressed sport they tended to lament
what they viewed as the corruption of sport as exercise along with its increasing
commercialization, especially in football.\(^\text{14}\) Educated elites generally distained
contemporary sporting activities, an attitude that ultimately prevented the ruling
classes from recognizing the potential political uses of modern sports. Positive
valuation of sports remained limited to notions of individual athletic activity as a
means of physical and moral development.

Through the decisions made about what to highlight and what to ignore,
popular newspapers reflected and reinforced elitist notions on the value of
particular sporting activities. The politically conservative paper \textit{ABC} at the turn of
the century for example offered only sporadic coverage and tended to focus on


\(^{13}\) Bahamonde Magro, \textit{op. cit.}, 93.

aristocratic sports. Only after 1912 did reporting increase and it wasn’t until 1928 that the paper established a dedicated sports section.\textsuperscript{15} Such thinking was not limited to political conservatives and similar notions could be found in the work of Pedro Rico, a lawyer and political liberal who later served two terms as mayor of Madrid during the Second Republic (1931–36). His 1930 book \textit{El “Sport” en España} typified the attitudes of many elites of all political stripes during the 1920s. Early on Rico declared that sport should be

\begin{quote}
Something that is well directed, perfectly oriented, officially protected since it serves to convert weak children into strong men, and these [men] into perfect humans both morally and physically who increase the productive wealth of the nation.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

According to Rico, modern sports such as football did not meet his criteria and instead led to an unhealthy obsession with records, speed, conflict and rivalry. Using medical imagery Rico saw professional sport as a “microbe” infecting the body of the nation. The negative impact of modern sport included leading young people away from religion and the conversion of professional athletes into virtual slaves.\textsuperscript{17} As a result of these developments Spanish sport had become a “body without a soul.” He blamed the government for neglecting its duty to guide and protect athletic activity, especially among the nation’s youth. No organization or entity coordinated sporting activities and as a result the system was infected with disorganization and taught only “the instinct to fight or the narcissism of the spectator.”\textsuperscript{18}

Ultimately Rico called for strong government intervention and developed a ten-point plan that he believed would save Spanish sports. His recommendations included the establishment of a central organizing body to coordinate the activities of regional federations and the development of compulsory physical education in schools from the elementary to the university level. Rico also called for the construction of sporting infrastructure such as fields, stadia, public baths and pools.\textsuperscript{19} Rico’s criticisms seemed to be directed squarely at the Primo de Rivera dictatorship that had ended in the year of the book’s publication. Although Rico and Primo de Rivera did not share a political ideology, the regime’s policies

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 26, 34, 35, 89.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 105, 195.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 201.
\end{flushleft}
reflected a similar belief in the power of physical education to impart or restore both physical and moral strength. As such it demonstrates how these traditional views of the value of physical activity and sport represented the dominant principles guiding the government’s interventions in these areas. Such notions fit neatly into the General’s overall emphasis on “the salvation and regeneration of the nation.”

In keeping with these principles, Primo’s government attempted to expand instruction in physical education. The need to strengthen Spaniards was deemed especially important for soldiers but officials quickly extended efforts to include all citizens. Such notions echoed the development of nationalist gymnastic movements in Europe and the United States such as the German Turnverein and the Czech Sokol organizations. In 1924 authorities tasked the delegados gubernativos assigned to each judicial district with distributing “gymnastic record books” where citizens were expected to record their physical activities. A year later plans for reforming the educational system called for compulsory gymnastics for boys and girls ages six to eighteen and each child was given a “biometric card” designed to track improvement over time. By 1928 a National Physical Culture Committee had been formed to implement a system of moral, political and physical education. As part of the program, military officers instructed citizens in gymnastics, shooting and patriotism. In what would become emblematic of the state’s efforts in the sporting arena many of these projects remained only partially and unevenly implemented across the country due to local resistance and a lack of funding. Infrastructure projects that were highly dependent on community financing never materialized and the government failed to assign officers to half of the country’s districts.

The modest execution of such plans in Spain offers a poor comparison to how similar ideas developed in Fascist Italy. Benito Mussolini’s government inherited virtually identical notions about the value of physical education along with a relatively undeveloped sporting infrastructure designed to put them into

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21 Quiroga, Making Spaniards, op. cit., 35.
23 Quiroga, Making Spaniards, op. cit., 57, 97, 103–6.
practice. Unlike the regime in Spain however, the Italian government invested heavily in both the organization of physical education programs and the facilities for its practice. In part, this reflected beliefs that gymnastic activities could be useful tools in ongoing efforts to encourage nationalism and build the nation state.\(^{24}\) It also represented an attempt to improve Italy’s performance in international athletic competitions including the Olympic games.\(^{25}\) Such efforts ultimately bore fruit during the 1930s as Italian athletes captured world championships in a variety of sports including boxing and football.

Had Primo’s dictatorship survived farther into the 1930s it is unlikely that Spanish athletes could have equaled their Mediterranean neighbor’s accomplishments. In large part this was due to a lack of organization and investment combined with the overall inefficiency of government.\(^{26}\) One of Pedro Rico’s suggestions called for the creation of a central body to coordinate athletic activities but under Primo no such entity existed. In fact, the administration lacked any official government agency dealing with sport and seemed content to maintain the practice of the Liberal state that allowed the industry to be largely self-governing.\(^{27}\) Throughout the regime, the *Guía oficial de España* listed no governmental body mandated to focus on the administration of sports.\(^{28}\)

The government’s unwillingness to invest heavily in the Olympic games revealed its tepid enthusiasm for using international sport as a tool for showcasing Spanish revival under the dictatorship. Although Spanish representatives attended the first Olympic congress in 1894, the *Comité Olímpico Español* [Spanish Olympic Committee] did not organize until 1912.\(^{29}\) Nevertheless, no official delegation from Spain participated in the first five Olympic Games held between 1896 and 1912. It was only due to pressure from the Catalan sporting press and other interests that the Committee finally sent a team to the 1920 games at Antwerp.\(^{30}\) Even so, the national football team that captured the silver medal had been organized and chosen

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\(^{24}\) Almansa, *op. cit.*, 58.

\(^{25}\) Simon Martin, *Football and Fascism. The National Game under Mussolini* (Oxford: Berg, 2004): 2, 33, 46, 48. See also Angela Teja, “Italian Sport and International Relations under Fascism,” in *Sport and International Politics*, *op cit.*.

\(^{26}\) Almansa, *op. cit.*, 62.


\(^{30}\) Torrebadells Flix, *op. cit.*, 116, 129.
by the sport’s regional federations and not by any centralized national body.\textsuperscript{31} Despite the success of the football team, the experience in Belgium left the committee with a debt of 15,000 francs. After the death of its president the Marqués de Villamejor in 1921 the Spanish Olympic Committee ceased to exist. It would however be reconstituted two years later.\textsuperscript{32}

In early 1924 athletes from sixteen countries gathered in Chamonix, France for the first winter Olympic games but none of the competitors was Spanish. In a scathing letter published in the newspaper \textit{El Sol} Manuel de Amezua blasted the Spanish Olympic Committee for not sending a delegation. Amezua, founder of the \textit{Club Alpino Español} [Spanish Alpine Club] argued that the “false modesty and weakness” of the directors meant that Spanish athletes missed out on the chance to compete against and learn from the best in the world. He sarcastically wondered if the committee members even knew that there were ice hockey clubs in Spain and asked why money could not have been found for “the noble art of skiing.” Amezua recognized that participation in such events, even if it was only with a single official delegate demonstrated that the nation was part of the international sporting community. He argued that an unwillingness to send an official representative showed Spain to be “an uneducated and ignorant country” and harmed its reputation abroad.\textsuperscript{33} The final section of the letter had been censured and it was reported that Amezua was heavily fined for his outburst.\textsuperscript{34}

Less than two months before the opening ceremony of the 1924 summer games in Paris, it was unclear whether or not Spain would send its athletes to compete. In March, the president of the Spanish Olympic Committee Santiago Guëll y López told the press that although they had been promised thousands of pesetas the committee had yet to receive a single one. Perhaps in an effort to appeal to the general and his government, Guëll y López declared that the games were “a battle for national sporting honor” and that without funding Spain would not have

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Flix2015} Torrebadells Flix, \textit{op. cit.}, 133.
\bibitem{Amezua1924} Manuel de Amezua, “La VIII Olimpiada” \textit{El Sol} February 7, 1924. For the next winter Olympics at St. Moritz Switzerland in 1928 the Club Alpino Español planned to use its own funds to send two delegates to the games. “El Club Alpino Español en la Olimpiada” \textit{La Voz} January 25, 1928.
\bibitem{Ogorzaly2014} Report of the fine came in “VIII Olimpiada Paris, 1924” \textit{Gran Vida} January 1924, 21. Military censors approved all copy before publication but the newspapers were allowed to indicate when something had been censured. Michael A. Ogorzaly, “Spanish Newspapers as Primary Sources: The Problem of Censorship and the Case of \textit{El Sol},” \textit{Primary Sources Original Works} 3, nos. 1/2 (2014): 37.
\end{thebibliography}
an army in the field.\textsuperscript{35} Ultimately Spain sent ninety-five competitors, including two women, the largest delegation in the nation’s history. Nearly a third of the team participated in the elite sports of equestrianism, sailing, fencing, tennis and swimming. Compared to the country’s unexpected success in 1920 the latest games were a disaster as Spanish athletes failed to win a single medal.\textsuperscript{36} Not only did they return empty handed but to make matters worse some of the results bordered on the farcical. Despite high expectations the football team crashed out of the tournament in the first round after a 1–0 loss to Italy due to injury and an own goal in the eighty-fourth minute while the shooting team had to forfeit because they had reportedly left their rifles in Spain.\textsuperscript{37}

Perhaps as a result of the disappointing results of 1924, the Spanish Olympic committee fought an uphill battle to obtain funding for the 1928 games in Amsterdam. During preparations the committee requested budgets from all regional athletic organizations to insure that there would be enough funds to “represent Spain with dignity.”\textsuperscript{38} The reports initially came in at a sum of 261,040 pesetas in fourteen categories including boxing, fencing, tennis and football among others.\textsuperscript{39} It was later reported that the Olympic Committee requested 243,656 pesetas a sum they felt was less than other nations had committed.\textsuperscript{40} Eventually newspapers printed that the committee had ultimately asked the regime for a stipend of 224,000 pesetas to pay for the team’s expenses in Holland.\textsuperscript{41}

Not everyone however felt that such a large expenditure was necessary. An article by journalist Alberto Martín Fernández under his byline “Juan Deportista” in Mundo Gráfico questioned the need for a large delegation especially after the nation’s performance in the previous games when the results did not match the money spent.\textsuperscript{42} In a similar essay published in the same periodical two weeks later Deportista acknowledged that the Olympics were great “tests” for those nations who considered themselves able to compete at the highest levels of sport. He argued however that Spain did not have the funds to properly compete in all events and

\textsuperscript{35} “Una vez más el Comité Olímpico Español nos dice ‘El nervio de las Guerras es el dinero,’” Sports 2, no. 25 (March 25, 1924): 1.


\textsuperscript{37} “España en la Olimpiada” Gran Vida July 1924, 214.

\textsuperscript{38} “Juegos Olímpicos” El Imparcial November 3, 1927.

\textsuperscript{39} “Olimpismo” La Voz March 1, 1927.

\textsuperscript{40} The figures given for other nations included France, 3 million francs, Germany 300,000 marks and Brazil £300,000. “El presupuesto para la participación de España,” Heraldo de Madrid December 1, 1927.

\textsuperscript{41} “Juegos Olímpicos,” El Siglo Futuro December 1, 1927.

\textsuperscript{42} Juan Deportista, “Temas Deportivas,” Mundo Gráfico March 16, 1927, 7; Robin, op. cit., 169.
sending such a large team wasted money and would not bring success. Instead the nation should only enter selected athletes who actually could compete with the greatest athletes of other nations.  

Despite his pessimistic view of Spanish chances at the 1928 Olympics, Deportista was not without an appreciation for the possibility of modern sport to play a positive role in boosting the country’s image abroad. In 1924 his book *La Furia Española* [*The Spanish Fury*] turned a previously negative label into a positive one, in part by claiming that the phrase signified “the patriotic manifestation of Spanish individualism.” Deportista’s criticism of the Olympic committee only underlined both the lack of governmental investment and the already advanced nature of Spanish football. In *Heraldo Deportivo* sportswriter Ricardo Ruiz Ferry claimed that an excessive focus on individual records was hindering the development of Spanish sport. He argued that the state should focus its resources on increasing broad public participation in physical education and concluded that sending weak athletes to the Olympic games would do nothing to help make Spaniards “physically and spiritually educated.” By the spring of 1928 the Olympic committee declared that the absolute minimum needed to compete effectively was 151,605 pesetas but the government pledged only 150,000 thus requiring cuts in the size of the delegation. Although *La Nación* announced that Spain was sending one hundred athletes just eighty ultimately represented the nation in Amsterdam with a third competing in the traditionally elite sports of fencing, sailing, swimming and equestrianism. Such numbers fell below those of Germany who sent 295, Italy with 195 and even Argentina at 81.

The decision to underfund the Olympic effort reflected the government’s priorities when it came to spending money to promote Spain’s image internationally. Just a few years earlier in 1926 the regime had established a foreign press agency headquartered in Paris called *Plus Ultra*. Named for the flying boat that had recently travelled from Spain to Argentina the bureau generated pamphlets,

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43 Juan Deportista, “Informaciones Graficas Deportivas,” Mundo Gráfico March 20, 1927.


46 “España ante los Juegos Olímpicos,” La Nación April 17, 1928.

press articles, radio broadcasts and other types of propaganda aimed at burnishing Spain’s image abroad. When dealing with cultural matters the emphasis focused on promoting tourism by highlighting artistic heritage and museums. While it was in operation the agency had an annual budget of 400,000 pesetas but actual costs after the second year routinely averaged 500,000 pesetas – over three times the amount spent on the 1928 Olympics. The government also prioritized funding for an international promotional campaign designed to lure tourists to Spain. Such efforts included the formation of the Spanish National Tourist Board in April 1928 and the opening of offices in places such as New York, Paris and Buenos Aires.

The poor state of physical education programs and Olympic training undoubtedly contributed to the country’s underwhelming showing at the 1928 games. Three years earlier writer Emilio Parras had drawn attention to the weak development of track and field athletes in Spain by publishing a table comparing the world records in various events to the top Spanish result. In each case Spain’s records were significantly below international marks. While it is true that Spanish athletes showed some improvement between 1925 and 1928 the results continued to lag behind those of the top performers. In May 1928 for example Joaquín Miguel Casas broke the Spanish record in the 400 meters, improving the mark by more than a second. Nevertheless, his time of 49.8 seconds was still over two seconds slower than the world record (47.6) and well behind the gold medal winning time in 1928 (47.8). Despite modest gains competitive results had not improved much as Spanish track and field athletes again failed to finish in the top six in any event at the 1928 Games. Overall, Spaniards earned only one medal, gold in Equestrian team jumping, a total that equaled that of Haiti and Luxemburg and placed them below such sporting powers as Egypt and Estonia.

**The Growth of Football**

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49 Ultimately the project was largely unsuccessful due to lack of funding. Ana Moreno Garrido, “La estrategia Atlántica. Elites económicas e intereses turísticos en la España de Primo de Rivera,” Historia Contemporánea, no. 41 (2011): 483, 501, 502.
The lack of investment and attention given to international sports reflected the fundamentally conservative nature of the regime especially in its attitudes toward sport. As the administration developed, however, it began to adopt many of the trappings associated with modern authoritarian regimes, especially that of Italy.\footnote{Shlomo Ben-Ami, Fascism From Above: The Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in Spain, 1923–1930 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 88, 182–84; Quiroga, Making Spaniards, op. cit., 35.}

The dictatorship incorporated some terms of fascist rhetoric such as “vitalism,” “action” and “discipline;” precisely the values that many theorists believed could be strengthened through physical activity.\footnote{Quiroga, Making Spaniards, op. cit., 57.}

The language echoed that of philosopher José Ortega y Gasset and although he generally withdrew from political activity during the regime, many of the government’s top ideologues appropriated Ortega’s ideas in their attempts to redefine the dictatorship as a modern political movement.\footnote{Ben-Ami, op. cit., 183–84.}

Ortega’s writings throughout this period were sprinkled with references to sport. In “The Sportive Origins of the State” he celebrated athletic activity calling it “the foremost and creative, the most exalted, serious, and important part of life.”\footnote{José Ortega y Gasset, “The Sportive Origins of the State” in History as a System and other Essays toward a Philosophy of History (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961 [1941]): 18.}

Sports provided a metaphor for life itself as individuals freely took on challenges in order to better themselves by overcoming them.\footnote{David Inglis, “Meditations on Sport: On the Trail of Ortega y Gasset’s Philosophy of Sportive Existence,” Journal of the Philosophy of Sport 31, no. 2 (2004): 84.}

In general though Ortega’s view of sport tended to remain fundamentally conservative in that he favored individual striving over the spectacle of modern sports. In The Revolt of the Masses he wrote disdainfully of modern man’s tendency “to make out of games and sports the central occupation of his life” and ridiculed the mental capabilities of “your average football ‘fan.’” Ortega saw the “mania” for public sports as a symptom of the underlining problems facing Spanish culture.\footnote{José Ortega y Gasset, The Revolt of the Masses (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1932 [1930]), 12, 100, 182.}

Such attitudes were commonplace among many writers, politicians and even those involved in sport. Pedro Rico believed that the professionalization of football meant its death as a sport while winter sports advocate Manuel de Amezua disparaged football and its fans calling it “unlikable, annoying and vulgar” and its crowds “crude and rude.”\footnote{Rico López, op. cit., 134; Manuel de Amezua, “La VIII Olimpiada,” El Sol February 7, 1924.}

In an essay published in the newspaper El Sol Ortega told the story of seeing three Indian athletes at the Ritz hotel in Barcelona. The men had come to compete
in an international tennis tournament and Ortega found it perplexing “That a man would come from Calcutta to hit a white ball with a racquet with a man from Barcelona is an act so formidably trivial that it launches all mental forces toward planetary perspectives.” The author saw such events as a sign that sports, not politics or economics would bring the world’s people together. 60 Despite his recognition of the potential of sport and its global reach Ortega still viewed such possibilities through the lens of elite competition and not through the increasing popularity of mass spectator sports. In terms of mass commercialized leisure Spain was already well advanced thanks to the development of bullfighting over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The industry grew after 1870 when the number of events and the money paid to top stars increased dramatically. By 1925 Juan Belmonte earned as much as 30,000 pesetas per fight, three times the annual salary of a Brigadier General.61 The rise of football as Spain’s most popular spectator sport and its institutional growth meant that by the time Primo de Rivera came to power the it was already well established both economically and organizationally. As a result, football continued to expand even without substantial governmental interference or control.

Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century football rapidly emerged in the capital of Madrid as well as in coastal cities like Bilbao, Barcelona and La Coruña. Although some pioneering clubs formed in the 1890s, the numbers exploded after the turn of the century. In Barcelona alone more than twenty different clubs organized during the period 1899–1903 and by 1910 at least thirty teams called the city of La Coruña home.62 The abundance of clubs quickly led to the formation of regional federations in Catalonia (1900) and Madrid (1902) as well as other areas. These federations soon became the sport’s dominant force and they performed a number of important functions including organizing competitions, purchasing grounds and even promoting expansion.63 A national body called the Real Federación Española de Clubs de Fútbol [Royal Federation of Football Clubs] was established in 1909 but had limited impact during the first four years of its existence. Even after reorganizing in 1913 the main function of the national federation was to coordinate activities and adjudicate disputes between regional groupings. By 1926 the country had thirteen regional federations and the most powerful were Centro (Madrid), Vizcaya and Catalonia; the latter representing

60 José Ortega y Gasset, “Charla, nada mas,” El Sol May 21, 1927.
62 Pujadas and Santacana, op. cit., 154; Almansa, op. cit., note 60, p. 83.
some 210 clubs. The final component in the development of the sport after the clubs and regional federations was the establishment of a sporting press along with increased coverage from mainstream newspapers. In 1903 the Madrid based sporting journal *Gran Vida* first appeared and *El Mundo Deportivo* of Barcelona followed just three years later. After some initial reluctance major periodicals including *El Sol*, *ABC* and *La Vanguardia* began to regularly report on sporting contests in part due to the demands of readers but also because of the growing revenue to be made by publishing announcements.

Even if the Primo de Rivera dictatorship had recognized the political potential of the sport, the advanced economic development and decentralized organization of football limited opportunities for governmental intervention. Italian fascists had originally held similar negative views on the value of football as a sport, preferring activities such as fencing and auto racing. Nevertheless, they soon came to recognize football’s appeal to the masses and its value as a tool for promoting the regime’s goals both nationally and internationally. In Spain however, the government seemed to view football as a problem to be managed and even suppressed rather than as a vehicle to help inculcate its own ideology. Such notions were in keeping with the regime’s goals of achieving “controlled mobilization” instead of a full-scale transformation of society and politics along the lines of the Italian model. Unlike other authoritarian regimes that viewed sport as an area of social organization to be absorbed into the political apparatus of the state, Primo never tried to extend the political control of the state or later the party into the realm of sporting administration. This unwillingness might have been a product of the regime’s overall lack of a clear ideology but it also reflected the already advanced development of football as a sporting industry. Mussolini used the financial difficulties of Italy’s national football federation to bring its governing apparatus under the control of the Fascist party. Eventually, management of the sport was subsumed under the auspices of the Italian Olympic committee who quickly set about reorganizing it with the goal of creating “calcio in a black shirt.” Likewise in Brazil during the 1930s the government of Getúlio Vargas took advantage of

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65 Bahamonde Magro, *op. cit.*, 111.
67 Martin, *op. cit.*, 2.
68 Ben-Ami, *op. cit.*, 126.
70 Martin, *op. cit.*, 52–3, 67.
rivalries within both football and the Olympic movement to consolidate control of sport within the government.\textsuperscript{71}

Attendance at football matches in Spain grew steadily alongside profits with the former engendering fears over the frenzy of the crowd and the latter inspiring comments on the potential tax revenues to be gained.\textsuperscript{72} Perhaps the difference between the Italian and Brazilian models and the Spanish one can best be illustrated through stadium building. In both Italy and Brazil, the government financed the construction of monumental stadia that served to cement the tight relationship between mass sport and mass politics.\textsuperscript{73} In Spain during the 1920s the government also initiated a vast program of public works construction and many cities including Barcelona (1922), Madrid (1923), Granada (1924), Murcia (1924) and Gijón (1928) added large stadia. For the most part, however, these football arenas were built using privately raised funds drawn from the membership of the clubs themselves and not from government coffers.\textsuperscript{74} The case of the \textit{Stadium del Metropólitano} in Madrid is instructive because the main impetus came from football clubs, developers and investors—not the state. An independent corporation that had previously constructed an extension of the city’s underground lines built the stadium. The brothers who owned the company as well as wealthy backers including the Spanish King viewed the stadium as a way of expanding development into the new areas of the city now served by public transportation.\textsuperscript{75}

The one major stadium linked directly to the regime’s largesse was the \textit{Stadi Olímpic}. Situated on Montjuic in Barcelona. The stadium was completed in 1927 as part of the works planned for the International Exposition of 1929. The construction of the stadium and even the Exposition itself again reflected the dictatorship’s ambiguous and uneven interest in the political uses of sport. Originally designed to celebrate Spanish industrial development, the Exposition was scheduled for 1917 but was delayed because of World War I. Primo’s dictatorship revived the idea viewing the event as an opportunity to showcase Spanish progress. The Exposition was subsequently renamed to reflect what were


\textsuperscript{72} On tax policy see the front-page story by writer Cristobal de Castro, “La nueva economía,” \textit{La Libertad} May 5, 1927.

\textsuperscript{73} Martin, \textit{op. cit.}, 49, 79; Drumond, \textit{op. cit.}, 1250.

\textsuperscript{74} Teresa Gonzalez Aja, “Spanish Sports Policy in Republican and Fascist Spain,” in \textit{Sports and International Politics}, 103; Pujadas and Santacana, \textit{op. cit.}, 162.

to be its three dominant themes: industry, art and sport. The stadium was to be included as part of the sporting section along with a grand building called the Palace of Sporting Material designed to showcase all manner of sports and sporting equipment. As the Exposition neared its opening in the spring of 1929, however, the building’s name was changed to the Palace of Chemistry, despite the fact that publicity materials and maps had already been produced using the original title.

The renaming of the pavilion reflected the regime’s preference for promoting Spain not through sports, but rather through technical achievements and cultural heritage. Like other authoritarian regimes such propaganda began with the construction of an idealized portrait of the dictator himself. As with Mussolini in Italy, the Primo de Rivera government sought to portray the general as “a species of superman with exceptional qualities.” While the Duce often was shown as a sportsman, in Spain it was King Alfonso XIII and not Primo de Rivera who was more closely linked to sport. The monarch typified the assimilation of English-style upper class attitudes and activities by elites in Spain. Alfonso played polo, hunted and enjoyed motor sports. He was also honorary president of the committee that attempted to bring the 1924 Olympic games to Barcelona and held similar positions at many football clubs. Instead of presenting Primo de Rivera as an avid sportsman, images of the Dictator focused more on his technical abilities. Two popular representations included the “Iron Surgeon” who could heal the body of the nation and the “Architect of the State” who would rebuild it.

The regime disseminated such representations through a variety of media including traditional print outlets as well as new formats including film, photography and radio. In this way, the dictatorship’s propaganda echoed policies in other fields like economics and culture that sought to modernize Spain. Government investment flowed to certain sectors including chemicals, electricity and transportation. Rail, subway and air travel increased dramatically and the number of motorized vehicles went from 28,000 in 1920 to 250,000 just ten years later. The expansion of the public transportation infrastructure indirectly benefited

77 “Palacio del Material Deportivo,” La Vanguardia March 20, 1928.
81 Quiroga, “Cirugano de Hierro...”, op. cit., 152, 157, 158.
the growth of sports by enabling the development of a truly national football league." The pages of the regime’s official newspaper *La Nación* showed how the regime prioritized other areas over sport. When Paulino Uzcudun won the European heavyweight boxing title in May 1926 it was front-page news. The paper proclaimed it a victory for Spain, noting that the country had only recently begun to participate in international sports. The article declared that athletic success demonstrated the nation’s vitality to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the story noted that such victories could not yet match Spain’s achievements in other areas, including those favored by the dictatorship: science, literature and art.

Promoting “the nation privileged in art and nature”

While the development of modern mass sports like football did not mesh with the regime’s priorities other forms of recreation did. Such cases generally involved motor sports including automobile tours and air travel. On April 16, 1927 journalist Tomás Borrás and photographer Leoncio Delgado Barreto began an automobile tour of the country sponsored by the Morris Motors Company and *La Nación*. The two men planned to travel more than 5,800 kilometers and stop at nearly 700 locations before the trip ended on July 15. Previews of the tour included detailed itineraries and maps designed to showcase “the marvels and beauties of a great part of our homeland, the nation privileged in art and nature.” Even before Borrás and Barreto made their trip, photographers, art historians and architects had begun to crisscross the peninsula photographing and recoding architecture and decorative elements from locations around Spain. These groups were involved in the planning for the construction of the *Poble Espanyol* an imaginary Spanish village built for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona. Both the Morris tour and the *Poble Espanyol* were part of the same overall project designed to communicate the timeless beauty of Spanish art and nature through the pages of the *La Nación* along with the construction “an idealized image of typical Spain.”

After the Morris tour kicked off, the pages of the newspaper filled with photographs and long, detailed descriptions of the places visited. The project emphasized both the modernization of the country along with its timeless art and striking natural beauty. Such notions encapsulated the regime’s own view of itself as representing both traditional and modern Spain. Making it an automobile tour celebrated motor sports culture and the generous use of photographs showcased the

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82 González Calleja, *op. cit.*, 224, 270, 271, 273, 284.
83 Ángel Diez de las Heras, “Uzcudun ha sido proclamado anoche campeón europeo de pesos pesados,” *La Nación* May 19, 1926.
84 “La vuelta a España en automovil,” *La Nación* April 7, 1927.
85 Mendelson, *op. cit.*, 23.
technologies of modern media. It also drew favorable attention to the government’s public works projects including the expansion of Spain’s highway system.  

Although centered on a modern form of recreation it remained faithful to the regime’s overall attitudes toward sport. It featured an activity more clearly linked to middle or upper class participation while its main purpose was to highlight technical accomplishment alongside achievements in traditional cultural forms such as art and architecture. Finally, it presented to readers a patriotic vision of a Spain that was modernizing yet remained rooted in tradition.

The government’s conflicted attitude toward sport is revealed in an article published in the regime’s mouthpiece La Nación by writer Concha Espina. Appearing as it did on the front page, in a space called “Our Collaborators” where the regime frequently published statements of political or social importance, the essay might be read as something akin to official policy. Espina used the success of boxer Paulino Uzcudun to reflect on the nature of sport. On the one hand, she seemed to acknowledge the potential propaganda value of successful athletes, especially those who excelled internationally. On the other hand, she retained a condescending attitude toward sports in general and for football in particular. She expressed a certain amount of respect for boxing calling it “an imposition of the age, stronger than all ethical and social objections and scruples.” Such phrasing perhaps reflected the government’s growing use of fascist-inspired language. She also cited the sport’s ancient origins and viewed the international success of Uzcudun as a triumph for Spain.

Despite her favorable impression of boxing and its potential to increase the global standing of the nation, she expressed nothing but disdain for football. The sport Espina wrote was too political and only served to promote regionalism. The link between alternative nationalisms and football had been part of the growth of the sport in the first decades of the twentieth century. The earliest attempts to link football and regional politics came in Vizcaya. Despite this, it was Catalonia (1904) that first organized a “national” team and a Basque squad was founded in 1915, five years before the first Spanish team took the field in 1920. Sometimes the repressive actions of the regime only contributed to the political symbolism attributed to some clubs. In 1925 F.C. Barcelona’s stadium was closed and the club banned for six months after fans whistled and jeered the himno español. Although the regime allowed for the existence of regional “national” teams, it was not above manipulating the sport to communicate its message of centralized nationalism. Government officials shuffled the team sheets during a 1924 match between the Spanish and Catalan national teams demanding that four players switch squads,

86 González Calleja, op. cit., 233.
including assigning an Asturian to play goal for Catalonia. After a suspiciously poor display of goal keeping Spain won 7–0.87

In what was an echo of the attitudes held by many elites Espina criticized the parochial nature of most football supporters writing that fans do not appreciate the game as sport but care “more if Tarrasa wins over Torrelavega or if Mondoñedo beats Cangas de Onis.” Eventually she described a scene that perhaps best captured the regime’s attitudes towards star athletes and toward sport in general; an attitude that was something between haughty condescension over the trivial importance of sport and a grudging acknowledgement of its popularity and potential. Espina related an anecdote about a time when both Uzcudun and Primo de Rivera attended the same bullfight in Madrid. The General decided to personally greet the boxer since he felt himself “full of politeness and of noble democratic spirit” and, tellingly, because the crowd expected it. She rhapsodized as “the glorious soldier” and the “athlete of the Spanish renaissance” shook hands proclaiming that they represented different reflections of Spanish greatness “a nation must be great through the fantasy of its poets, with the thinking of its wise men, with the sword of its heroes and with the fist of its fighters.”88

Conclusion

The collapse of the regime and the advent of the Republic in 1931 did not mark a significant change in the Spanish state’s willingness to promote sport. Only after the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) did the government institute a system more closely resembling those in other authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, many of the same attitudes and limitations that characterized the Primo de Rivera regime continued to be issues under Franco. A national coordinating body called the Delegación Nacional de Deportes (National Sporting Delegation—DND) formed in 1941 and, at least in principle sought to emulate the work of similar groups in Italy and Germany. The DND controlled the Olympic committee and ended the autonomy of regional federations due to its ability to appoint leadership personnel and veto any decision made at lower levels. Although the new administration had finally managed to place sport under government control, something the previous dictatorship had not managed, such reforms failed to turn Spain into an international sporting power. Despite more centralized direction over sport the same traditional attitudes and actions continued to limited the nation’s effectiveness in international competitions. Few experienced sports administrators served on the DND and its top man General José Moscardó had little previous connection to sport. In addition, the

88 Concha Espina, “El Triunfo de Paulino,” La Nación February 27, 1929.
Franco regime continued the practice of previous administrations in underfunding the organization and as a result Spain’s performance in international competitions showed little improvement. Spanish athletes competed in six Olympic games during the dictatorship winning just one gold, two silvers and two bronze medals.  

One reason for Primo de Rivera’s lack of interest in sport was a desire to limit mass mobilization for fear it might lead to more radical changes. Franco’s regime employed football as a means of “informal nationalization” by promoting connections between the nation and political state. During the 1940s the dictatorship emulated authoritarian regimes in Italy and Germany by using national football team games as a stage for political theater. Media outlets publicized the “narrative of the Spanish fury” linking the bravery, courage and strength of the national squad to the positive traits of all Spaniards. The falangist anthem played before games and on the pitch players made the fascist salute. Nevertheless, despite such efforts and others, albeit stripped of fascist trappings, during subsequent decades the overall impact was limited.

In the 1920s, soccer emerged as the most popular spectator sport in the country and its rapid growth and relative independence from direct state control meant that its popularity could never be effectively mobilized to support Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship. Likewise, under Franco many Spaniards were able to disassociate national sporting success from a dictatorship that so desperately tried to claim ownership of them. The most visible expression of Spain’s athletic prowess, for example Real Madrid’s dominance of the European Cup competition during the 1950s was not directly connected to the state.

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