

Summary

THE PATRIOTIC MAN WITH A SPORTS RELIGION

Lauri Pihkala, the Champion of Modern Sports Ideology

The purpose of this work was to study the life of Honorary Professor (1948) Lauri “Tahko” Pihkala (1888–1981) as well as the roots, foundations and principles of his sport and physical exercise philosophy. Another objective was to examine Pihkala’s role and significance in the formation and development of the Finnish sport and physical exercise culture from the early 20th century until the 1970s.

Tahko Pihkala became the “grand old man” of Finnish sport. Probably all of his contemporary countrymen learned to know him as the “people’s Tahko” who tirelessly “sermonised” about the virtue and bliss of sport and physical exercise, both through his own practical sporting activities and through his innumerable books, articles, interviews and lectures.

In order to understand the life and sports philosophy of Pihkala and the overall Finnish physical exercise culture, it is vital to recognise three central historical events, or rather phenomena, which had an impact not only on the formation of the Finnish national identity, but also, and especially, on the development of Pihkala’s own ideals and philosophy of life and the world. The first phenomenon was the upsurge of hatred felt in the early years of the 20th century against the Russianisation policy of the Russian despots. Indeed, the limitation of Finnish national rights and freedoms led to open hostility and the assassination of the Russian governor-general Nikolai Bobrikov in 1904. The repression policy did not fit within the concept of justice held by the majority of the Finns, Tahko Pihkala included. One consequence of this hatred directed towards the Russians was the “Jaeger” or light-infantrymen movement, established among Finnish pro-independence activists and promoted by the events of the first world war. Originating mainly among young university students, the movement enrolled, in 1914–1916, volunteers for military training in Germany, in expectation of the forthcoming fight for freedom. Lauri Pihkala was an activist but never left for Germany. He had a central practical role when the “White” civil guards were founded by the political-ideological right and centre in the summer of 1917. In fact, in January 1918, Finland became involved in a civil war as the political left, i.e., the “Reds”, following the example of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, made an attempt to seize political power after Finland had declared independence on 6 December 1917. Lauri Pihkala was very disappointed as large numbers of working-class sportsmen joined the ranks of the Reds, quite contrary to his hopes and expectations. The war resulted

in a division of the country, not only in politics but also in sport. As concerned Tahko Pihkala, in particular, the eventual threat of Soviet occupation led him to combine sport with national defence so that he spent the peak of his life and career in the service of the sports department of the civil guard organisation (1921–1926, 1931–1944), until the suppression of that organisation after WW2.

Secondly, during the above-mentioned period of Russian repression in the early 20th century, the people had very few opportunities to gather except for sports events. Modern competitive sports, born in Britain in the 1860s, became established in Finland in the 1880s and '90s. However, it was not until the years 1902–1907 that competitive sports became a genuine popular movement. From the summer of 1905 onwards, Pihkala was a well-known figure on the sports grounds. He was also dedicated to coaching, as evidenced by his first study trip to the US in 1907. The outcome of that trip was the first Finnish track-and-field coaching guide "*Urheilijan opas*" (Sportsman's Guide) (1908). In the Olympic Games, Pihkala tried his luck in the high jump (1908) but due to his modest success, switched to sprinting. In 1910–1912, he ranked number one in Finland in 200–800 meters. The 1912 Olympics in Stockholm were a failure for Pihkala the sportsman. However, for the Finnish cause, the games were a huge success. From the perspective of both the nationalistic aspirations felt among the upper social classes and the enthusiasm for competitive sports generally shared more strongly by the students and by the middle and working-classes, the Finnish sportsmen and women in Stockholm made both the world and the country's own citizens aware of the young nation. The sportsman with a working-class background, Hannes Kolehmainen, became the hero of both the games and of Finland by winning both the 10,000 and the 5,000 metre events. In particular, his win with a strong final spurt in the latter run boosted national self-esteem and faith in the abilities of the Finnish man. Among others, Pihkala shared whole-heartedly the Finnish frenzy generated, in addition to Kolehmainen, by the Finnish javelin throwers, shot-putters and wrestlers. Stockholm marked the beginning of Finland's extraordinary success in Olympic events which lasted until the Helsinki Olympics (1952). Following the Stockholm games, Tahko Pihkala was ready to dedicate his life to sport. After the games and his graduation – Pihkala took his MSc degree in the spring of 1912 – he decided to make a second study trip to the US. Instead of a PhD, he brought home the skills and knowledge of a sports consultant, or a "travelling preacher" dedicated to the cause of sport, a task that he pursued from 1913 to 1917. During the inter-war period, Finland ranked among the very top of the sporting nations. With the foundations and objectives of the Olympics sports, Pihkala and the other sports personalities built up the Finnish physical exercise culture between the great wars by encouraging young boys and men not only in school sports, but also in winter skiing and track-and-field athletics and ball games during the summer. In the 1920s and '30s, Finnish baseball became a popular sport, developed by Tahko Pihkala in 1914–1922, based on American baseball. Originally, Pihkala designed the game to help in the development of the motor capacities needed in track-and-field sports, which would also help to guarantee success in future Olympics.

The third significant phenomenon, with seemingly no connection whatsoever with sport, was the general process of secularisation which spread in Finland as a result of western modernisation. The link between modernisation and secularisation with sport has to do with the vacuum, left behind by the ceding Christian values and principles, which needed filling. Success in sport provided an insuperable means of finding a *raison-d'être* and prestige in life. A simple and concrete mark of manhood, competitive sports did not leave the sportsmen cold. The western sports movement, with its inherent winning and record objectives, was mostly a consequence of the abandonment of traditional Christianity. The roots of western modernisation and of its core, secularisation, lay deep in the Renaissance of the late Middle Ages, but it was not until the new concepts of man and education of the era of Enlightenment won ground in the 18th century that modernisation truly made progress. The decisive role in the breakthrough of modernism was played by the late evolutionists Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. In particular, Spencer's ideas regarding the social-Darwinian mode of thought and action, according to which people were involved in an ongoing survival battle in which only the fittest, the most able and even the most ruthless would triumph, was adopted as the general principle of life. According to this new mode of thought – or mentality – people had to operate in the world depending on their own natural laws, i.e., as architects of their own fortunes. Lauri Pihkala adopted the social-Darwinian model of life no later than in 1912–1913 in America; the youngest child of a priest's family abandoned Christian authority and wanted to live “in a decent but pagan manner”. During his travels, Pihkala also learned of racial theories (including those of Kellie and Pearson), American pragmatism (James), and especially the instinct theories of play and sport developed by Karl Groos and Luther H. Gulick. Since Pihkala was convinced that play, competition and thus also competitive sports were a part of man's instinctive functions, he became and remained very fond of and attached to the following aphorism: “We ought to live sacrificing, and singing, and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the Gods, and to defend himself against his enemies and conquer them in battle”.

After his sports awakening, Tahko started to look for theoretical explanations for the origins and nature of sports, for his own sporting activities as well as for general explanations which would promote the sports cause. He found the most important explanatory factors in the above philosophy of play and, above all, in the biological theory of sports. Those who had started to train early for combat were the most successful in the battle for the survival of the fittest. Through evolution, play and the above combat tasks had gradually turned into instinctive functions. Sport, thus an outcome of evolution, was a bridge between play and work. Tahko's play and sports philosophy was deeply rooted in biological evolution theory. Physical exercise and the closely connected sports were not a consequence of culture but a pre-requisite of culture. In this context, Tahko found much support in the fact that the entire modern western physical education culture had, for over fifty years, been built on the same value and ideological basis – within the framework of evolution theory and social

Darwinism. A follower of Ivar Wilskman, the “father of Finnish sports”, Tahko adopted much of the justification principles of sports shared by Viktor Balk who was the father of Swedish sports and an inspiration and friend of “Wilsk”. Balck also justified the excellence of competitive sports through the Darwinian theory of evolution. According to both Balck and Tahko, competition was the mother of progress in all fields of life. Competition was life itself, the elixir of life.

In fact, the 1920s was a period of “intoxication” for Finnish sports, in Tahko’s express terms. The success at the Olympics of Antwerp, Paris and Amsterdam, and Paavo Nurmi’s splendid runs, in particular, contributed to a sports frenzy, not only in Finland but also abroad. Indeed, many foreigners became aware of Finland as the land of Nurmi. But through Nurmi, the dark side of sports, i.e., dishonesty about the rules, also entered the public domain. It is only in very recent years that it has been openly admitted that as early as the 1920s, Nurmi was a fully-fledged professional – regardless of the rules. The most visible Finnish sports leaders of the early 1930s – Tahko Pihkala and Urho Kekkonen, the president of SUL, the Finnish Sports Federation – found themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea in the process, played out during the Los Angeles Olympics in 1932, of declaring Nurmi a professional. The two friends, still “sacred brothers” at that time, were of the same opinion: Nurmi was guilty but since only the SUL had the legal right to initiate disciplinary action, Nurmi had to be defended until the bitter end. In particular, the active role played by the Swedes in this respect caused great rancour and offence. One consequence of these events was a boycott against the Finland-Sweden games. A Finnish national patriot, it was obviously easy for Tahko to promote the breach of the sporting contacts, although he did not share any particularly fervent feelings against Sweden and the Swedish language. Kekkonen’s and Pihkala’s friendship ended in 1946 when Pihkala tried to expel Kekkonen – a newly converted friend of the Russians who had caused public offence through his alcohol abuse – from his presidency of the SUL, yet failing in his attempt. At that time, Pihkala became a sort of “an angry dog” who tried in vain to bark at the contemporary sports leaders and convert them to support his own idealistic and morally pure notion of model amateur sports.

After the second World War, during the so-called danger years, Tahko continued to be very concerned about the future of Finland. Already retired, he still felt the threat and continued to ponder the further promotion of the physical capacity of the nation. In addition to his healthy-life sermons, Tahko got carried away and developed his skiing tour idea of the 1950s into extreme-length tours. It was not only a question of national defence, however; Tahko was also involved in a personal battle against old age. Contrary to his expressed wish to concentrate on research and writing, he could not discipline himself but returned to the world of his youth, the design of play and ball games. During the following two decades, he dedicated himself to the planning and dissemination of his new “lightning ball” idea, with a passion and enthusiasm that started to assume obsessive proportions. It is fair to say that Tahko was a dedicated herald of the sports cause until the end of his life. His love of sports seemed even greater than his love of his wife and children. His entire life circulated around

the love of sports. However, sport should not be an end in itself – this also applies to religion – but it should serve a “greater” cause. In the case of Tahko, that greater cause was to serve the fatherland by promoting and enhancing the defence capacity of both soldiers and civilians. Tahko was not interested in personal or sporting honours, his goal was to honour the fatherland.

It was not until the 1940s that Tahko Pihkala developed and matured into a sports philosopher; inspired by the thoughts of Schopenhauer, he developed a synthesis of all things that he had learned so far. The mystery of Schopenhauer’s “will of life” inspired him to ponder on the future, both on a personal level and on the level of the Finnish nation. What was central in Tahko’s way, philosophy and principles of life was their permanent character and dependence on the social-Darwinian ideology. As early as the 1910s, all the basic prerequisites of life and living had already matured in his mind. He never gave up the idea of the instinctive dimension of play and sports discussed above. Likewise, he continued to be interested racial thinking even after WW2. Life for him was motion and battle, battle and physical movement was life. However, the battle had to be fair, and let the best win in that spirit! Without physical exercise and sport there was no real life. Everyday exercise through sport, with the joy derived from the effort, was the worship of the mystical “will of life”, an act of religious devotion through which the foundation of life – movement – gave the person involved in this exercise the strength to continue life itself. Sport became a religion for Tahko. In 1978, the 90-year-old Tahko gave personal testimony of that in a meeting preparing for the Tahko Pihkala Society and its intense informal debates. On that occasion, Tahko gave an introductory speech on “My Credo in Sports and in Finland’s Need for It.”

From the point of view of the present study it was important to recognise the dimension of religiousness or the sacred. The sacred is something that is apart or separated from everyday life, even if the sacred often appears in the midst of the everyday. The sacred is not only an internal feeling or experience of the supernatural, but a fundamental relationship to Him, him or it, the object of man’s worship. In Christianity, it is basically a question of the worship of God which, in practise, takes the form of acts of devotion, i.e., various external (physical-spiritual) acts such as praying, gospel reading and listening, meditation, visits to the church-temple and sharing Holy Communion. Should the object of worship be other than the Bible’s Christian God, we speak about worship of idols, with a false god as the object of the faith. Tahko’s religion was a form of manteistic religiousness in which the object of worship is man, his performance and achievements. The practice and experience of the sacred calls mostly for a ritualistic process or behaviour. In the case of Tahko, the “bliss of exhaustion” led to a kind of nirvana, as the ecstasy of life and pleasure overcame him, at least momentarily, through the blissful sensation of the returning energy. Through sport, Tahko sought and achieved a certain grip on life and life management. The paradox of the “joy of effort” became the basic concept of Tahko’s physical exercise philosophy.

According to Professor of Theology Veikko Anttonen, sport and physical exercise are activities comparable to religion, with the human body playing the

central role; in actual religion, the main role is played by the spirit or the soul, that part of us which, in this life is imprisoned in the body, but which, in the afterlife, will return as a part of the unlimited sacred, a part of that area which is normally associated with the presence of God. A bodily performance which exceeds the limits comprehensible to humans, assumes the attribute of “divine”. For Tahko, the object of faith, the God, became the blind Schopenhauerian “will of life”, the source and maintainer of all life and its core – movement. When the movement stops, life ends. For Tahko, the exercise of sport and physical activity was a service of God, a ritual to honour and worship the “will of life” on the one hand and, on the other, a means to liberate oneself from the *Lebensangst* produced by blind will. On the basis of the above, Tahko Pihkala’s faith in sport can also be referred to as “the religion of the body, body religiousness, bodily religion or religiousness”. Body religion is a part of a larger form of religiousness, or the manteistic religiousness – which worships the performance, achievements and success of man.

Naturally, there is nothing new about the idea of something which is not traditionally classified as a religion becoming a religion. The Italian political scientist Emilio Gentile regards Fascism as a political religion. According to Marja Härmänmaa – who in her work introduced Gentile’s work and concepts to Finland – the title of Gentile’s book “The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy” clearly indicates the idea. Italian Fascism was a new type of religion in which the worship of the fatherland assumed the nature of a Fascist cult. According to Gentile, Fascism was a true religion because the Fascists shared “a religious sentiment which made them take life seriously”. The objective of Fascism was to create a new man, a fighter with blind faith in Fascism. While Gentile calls the 20th century the century of the sacralisation of politics, we can also call it the century of the sacralisation of sports. However, politics and sports are not antagonistic to each other since both are part of a wider notion of religiousness, the manteistic religiousness.

Although Tahko did not recognise, or rather admit to, his sports faith until the latter part of his life, his friends had already admitted to it. Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic movement, the influential German sports personality Carl Diem (1882–1962) who was Tahko’s friend and his other friend Avery Brundage (1887–1975), the American who was the President of the IOC from 1952 to 1962, all shared and confessed to the notion that sport was the religion of the 20th century. In the following quotation, Brundage very clearly expresses his views about the innermost significance of the Olympic movement to Coubertin and about his own role as the President and that of the other members of the IOC: “It is a 20th Century religion which Coubertin founded in the Olympic movement, a religion with universal appeal which incorporates all the basic values of other religions, a modern, exciting, virile, dynamic religion, attractive to youth, and we of the International Olympic Committee are its disciples.” The statements of the influential men in sports who have confessed to this faith and have shown it in practise should speak for themselves.

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