Equestrian Olympics in Stockholm 1956

From upper class masculinity to people’s sport and feminine leisure

Introduction

In year 1956 the Olympic Games were split between Stockholm and Melbourne. The former hosted the Equestrian Olympics. The division of the games was caused by the quarantine regulations of Australia, due to which the horses were required to spend a long time in the country before competing. Here I will analyse gender and social class relations in equestrian sports using articles from the daily press focusing on this competition, in order to demonstrate that the traditional connection between horse riding and upper class and masculinity was deconstructed at this time.

Equestrian Sports and the Olympic Games

In the Olympic Games in Paris year 1900, horse riding was included. After that it disappeared for a few years, and not until 1912 years at the Olympics in Stockholm – show-jumping, dressage and three-day eventing – became part of the regular Olympic programme.¹

Equestrian Olympics 1956

The Equestrian Olympics in 1956 were held in Stockholm during a week in June. In the beginning of June the press described the financial conditions and reported on the visit of the British Queen who was in the country to watch the games. The Queen had volunteered one of her horses, Countryman, who was ridden by Mr A. E. Hill in three-day eventing.²
The games were opened on the 10th of June and the competitions begun the day after with the dressage of the three-day eventing.\textsuperscript{3} The tests were held during two days. After these days the British team was in 1st place, the German team in 2nd place and the Swedish team in 3rd place.

The day after it was time for the cross-country ride which was considered the toughest part of the event and newspapers gave an account of how the British Queen, Princess Margaret and the Swedish Prince Bertil walked the cross-country track the day before the competition. The cross-country track was much longer at that time than today, and consisted of several different parts (flat racing, cross country racing, steeple chase and so on). The Olympic track in Stockholm was regarded as difficult, but not more difficult than what was customary for the Olympics.\textsuperscript{4} However, the competition came to be harder than expected. The night before it had rained heavily, and the track had become too wet in a few places. It was reported that 11 national teams cracked under the pressure, and that 13 riders never reached the finish line.\textsuperscript{5} The Swedish team broke down and one of the Swedish horses had to be put away after it had been hurt in a fall at obstacle no 22. The obstacle consisted of a deep ditch with a fence in the middle. In the press it was called ‘the obstacle of terror’\textsuperscript{6} and one of the papers wrote that:

It could not have been more dramatic. A muddy, fatally slippery track with spookily towering obstacles. Falls, tumbles, and half a dozen sweaty, exhausted riders in hospital. Johan Asker was stuck beneath the most difficult obstacle of the track, his brave Iller had to be shot – a macabre closing scene.\textsuperscript{7}

Several newspapers describe the tournament as cruel to animals and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals reported the organisers to the police.\textsuperscript{8} At the same time, all
newspapers stated how amazing it was that a Swedish warrant officer, Petrus Kastenman, now lead the competition.

The three-day eventing was concluded by the show jumping test – won by Kastenman. The Swedish team did not make it. The British team won team gold, with the German team came in 2nd place. The Olympic dressage contest took place on the 15th and 16th of June. The gold medallions (team and individually) went to the Swedes. The German Hans Winkler won the show jumping competition, which was determined on the final day of the games.

Amateur or professional?

Now, lets turn to the questions of class and gender relations. In the 1956 Olympics it was clear from the regulations that an amateur rider was not allowed to profit from riding (like in other sports). However, the rules did not apply if one was a member of the military. Originally, the exception did not apply to all members of the armed forces but only high-ranking officers. Sweden learned this in London 1948 where the Swedish team won the dressage competition, but forfeited its 1st place when it was discovered that one of the competitors was not a high-ranking officer. Prior to the games this person had been promoted to a second lieutenant, but after the Olympics he was demoted to sergeant again. This caused the French to submit a protest, and the dressage-winning team from Sweden was disqualified. In one of the Equestrian journals it was stated that the Olympic rules were ‘antiquated’.

The rule that no low-ranking officers were allowed to compete in Equestrian sports in the Olympics was removed before the games of 1952, but the question of who were amateurs and who were professionals arose once again in 1956. Kastenman was praised in the daily papers and evidently it was considered sensational that a low-ranking officer had won on this level and it is clear that high-ranking officers were expected to win.
The day after the cross country ride, the headline ‘Polio victim sergeant is the Swedish gold medal hope’ could be seen on the front page of one of the daily papers. The caption was referring to Kastenman, and it is obvious that the journalist wanted to portray him as someone who won from a weak position. Kastenman was not a polio victim – the journalist must have confused him with another rider – but the fact that he was a sergeant, i.e. a low-ranking officer, was crucial information. Moreover, he was said to

‘embody a trembling hope that lives in many, many thousands of Swedes who are sold on riding’.13

The journalist also emphasised Kastenmans disadvantageous position by calling him the ‘unknown soldier’. Another headline stated that

‘simple field grey was beating hunting elegance’.14

The fact that Kastenman did not have a so-called service horse probably had a lot to do with why his victory was considered sensational. This meant that he was not entitled to one particular horse that he could train and compete with. He had to use the horse that was allotted to him, while high-ranking officers had the possibility to choose and use a certain horse. To remedy this, one of the papers started a fund-raising collection for Kastenman on the 15th of June in order to make it possible for him to buy the horse he had ridden.15 However, the collection was brought to an early close on the 16th of June when the Crown gave Kastenman the horse as a service horse, making him the first low-ranking officer to receive one. The already beginning speculation in French newspapers whether the collection would make Kastenman a professional rider, and whether he as such would have to return the gold medal,
probably played a part in this gift. Kastenman was of another social class than the high-ranking officers usually connected to the Equestrian sports and now he was accepted.

The question of social class was connected to masculinity and as other social class expectations became apparent another masculinity was stressed. There seems to have been two different ideal types of masculinity in the Equestrian Olympics: a traditional military ideal and a modern sportsman. The former was associated with physical fitness, strength, daring and stoicism. The male riders were expected to endure, despite great physical strain. Dramatic descriptions from the cross-country test are proof of this. Another example is the portraying of the gold medallist show-jumping rider, Winkler. Before the last jumping test, Winkler had contracted muscular pain in his groin, and is said to have yelled at every jump. However, the military ideal was also criticised and seen as an old ideal:

In the past, when the competition was purely military, it could possibly have been justified as it existed to test the ability of the best cavalry horses to move through all kinds of terrain. Now this difficult test can be excluded, since there are few countries with mounted regiments.

It was clearly expressed that the traditional ideal did not belong in modern sport. Other qualifications were now required, and first of all that horse and rider should be fit enough. In this criticism a new kind of ideal sportsman is found – the modern sportsman. This man had to train physically to be able to practise his sport – just like Kastenman. A high-ranking title was not enough.
Women and femininity in the Equestrian Olympics

Possibly the new requirements even made way for women to enter the Equestrian Olympics. Overall, as you all know, there have been fewer women than men in sports, even when women have been allowed to participate and it is evident from documents from the Swedish National Equestrian Organisation that men and especially army officers dominated the competition arena of horse riding on a national level in Sweden at this time. Women’s participation in Equestrian sports in the Olympic Games was regulated by certain rules. In 1952 women were allowed to participate in the Olympic dressage; 1956 they could take part in the show-jumping competition; and not until 1964 it women were allowed to partake in the Olympic three-day eventing.

When it comes to women three analytical categories for how they were presented in the press in connection to sport can be useful: the primarily-a-woman; the ridiculous sports-practising woman and the serious sports-practising woman. However, it is obvious that ‘the ridiculous woman’ was seldom identified in the newspapers’ texts in connection to the Equestrian Olympics, whereas the other categories occurred. However, the categories are not always simple to separate from one another, and an analysis of the texts suggests that they sometimes overlap. An example is, the English grooms who were present at the Olympics. They were pictured in working clothes, dressed just like many of the male grooms, wearing pale brown, well-creased trousers and brownish-grey blazers with small checks with blue shirts and black ties with white patterns and they were said to be hard working. Simultaneously the English grooms’ constructed femininity was emphasised in the press. One of them was quoted and portrayed in the following manner:

I treat it (Countryman – the British Queen’s horse) just like the other horses, says groom Shirley Burr, who is a very pretty lady who wears her black hair in plaits. I have looked
after horses for five years and will continue to do so for the rest of my life. Of course I ride. Nearly all Englishwomen do.\textsuperscript{20}

In the quote, Shirley Burr stressed that she was a serious worker. Still, the journalist who interviewed her could not help but assess her looks. Further down in the article, a quote from one of the English riders expressed that there was a special feminine competence when it came to looking after horses. Women were thought to be gentler, milder, calmer and more graceful than men. The qualities of ‘primarily-a-woman’ was emphasised for the female dressage competitors as well. (Lis Hartel and Liselotte Linsenhoff, who finished second and third.) It is likely that the journalists emphasised a femininity totally different from a masculinity probably in order to withhold the gender division. Hartel, was also depicted in another way. Hartel was a polio victim, and she was in combination with being as ‘lovely, gentel she was depicted as hard-training and fighting the war against her disease. Before she became ill she was said to have been a ‘vigorous woman’. In other words, Hartel’s image was that of the serious sports-practising woman. So was Linsenhoff, the papers wrote about her hard training while her husband babysat.\textsuperscript{21} This femininity also recurred in depictions of the British show-jumping rider Patricia Smythe. Smythe was already well-known in horse-riding circles, both as a rider and as the author of a textbook on horses and riding, entitled \textit{A book about horses}. The press presentation of Smythe was, just like that of Hartel and Linsenhoff, complex. Smythe, who was depicted as a competent rider was also pictured as very pretty. The following quote contains obvious complexity:

\begin{quote}
She took bronze in her national team, the only one in a blue coat among all the civil riders. … But Patricia’s Queen eagerly applauded her young subject’s capability. This would probably mean something at the closing of the general books. Patricia rode out,
flushed with exertion and satisfaction. She looked almost defiant. It became her very well.22

A modern rider was not even necessarily a man. Hard training rather a high ranking military title seemed to be essential. In articles about Kastenman it is apparent that his training led him to the gold medal. It was heavily emphasised how much he trained in his spare time.23 As has already been observed, the modern sportsman was also a ‘man of the people’. Even when Kastenman’s sports achievements were not in the article foreground, it was stressed that he was ‘just like everybody else’ as was the women. The women’s motherhood as well as Kastenmans fatherhood was commented upon. Right after winning the gold medal Kastenman was pictured with his son in front of him in the saddle in one of the papers and in the article it was emphasised that Kastenman was about to take the car home with his family and that his son was tired, but that he would be given ice-cream. Obviously the traditional military ideal was deconstructed for a construction of a modern sportsman or women.

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1 http://www.sok.se/idrotter/arkivforidrotter/ridsport.5.18ea16851076df63622800013493.html
2 See Svenska hästen i arbete och sport, 158 as well as Dagens Nyheter 1956-06-15, 12.
3 According to SOK’s version of events, the competitions began with the dressage, see http://www.sok.se/olympiskhistoria/ryttarspelen1956/tavlingarna.4.60107d9a10b666b1ec5080001623.html, but if one follows the reportings from the competitions in the contemporary press it is clear that the riders’ games began with the dressage test of the three-day event, and that the dressage was the second sport.
4 Ragnar Gustafsson 2008-01-22; Dagens Nyheter 1956-06-10; Expressen 1956-06-04. See also Den svenska hästen i arbete och sport, 156-158.
5 Svenska Dagbladet 1956-06-14. The drama of the competitions overshadowed another incident, which ought to have been just as dramatic. A fire had started in the manege of K1, the Olympic manege. Horses were evacuated and the riding-school was burnt to the ground. Dagens Nyheter also reported that an ammunition magazine exploded. Two smoking grooms were suspected. Svenska Dagbladet 1956-06-14 and Dagens Nyheter 1956-06-14, 7.
6 Svenska Dagbladet 1956-06-14, 10-11.
7 Dagens Nyheter 1956-06-14
8 Svenska Dagbladet 1956-06-14,16; Expressen 1956-06-14, 23; Dagens Nyheter 1956-06-14, 18 and 1956-06-15, 1; Vasabladet 1956-06-17.
9 The English team’s victory was emphasized as fitting, since the British Queen was present to watch the competitions. See Svenska hasten i arbete och sport, 158 and Dagens Nyheter 1956-06-15, 12. However, it was Kastenman’s triumph which received the most attention in the Swedish press. In The Times, the headline on the 15th of June is “British riding triumph”, although naturally Kastenman’s victory is also mentioned.
10 Hästen was a monthly journal, read by people interested in riding all over the country.
Not only the new newspapers interpreted Kastenman’s victory thus. Ragnar Gustafsson and Göran Lindstrand both state that Kastenman was thought to be different from the high-ranking officers that competed for Sweden. Ragnar Gustafsson 2008-01-22 and Göran Lindstrand 2008-06-24. For information about the French papers’ speculations, see Svenska Dagbladet 1956-06-16, 12. In Dagens Nyheter 1956-06-16, 12 it is written that the head of the army decided to give Kastenman the horse as a service horse and not one of his own, so that he could keep his amateur status. Helena Tolvhed http://www.idrottsforum.org/articles/tolvhed/tolvhed.html, 2008-06-28, The first portrait of the serious sports-practising woman appeared at the time of the Olympic Games in Melbourne, but mostly women were just ridiculed and sexualised. See also Eva Queckfelt (2000) who shows how women’s sports-practising is often ridiculed; and Hedenborg (2008).