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# The Illustrated London News and Sport

Steve Tate

Independent Researcher, Historian and Journalist



## Introduction

Sport for the well-to-do gentleman in mid-nineteenth century London and the Home Counties embraced news and comment on hunting, fishing and shooting, together with horseracing, where the popular meetings of Newmarket, Epsom, Ascot and Goodwood grew to frame an organised social scene spanning the summer months. A clutch of more athletic sports setting individual against individual, and an even more limited range of team games, were deemed worthy of attention, too, although their staging was often irregular. *The Illustrated London News* was to acknowledge the central place of field sports within the national sporting heritage with a six-part series in 1843, setting forth the pleasures, skills and background to the favoured pastimes.

The activities judged worthy of inclusion in the 'Sports of England' series were stag hunting, hare hunting, wild duck shooting, coursing (the competitive running to ground of hares by specially trained dogs), fly fishing and grouse shooting. Although opportunities to engage in several of the blood sports featured might have been limited for the metropolitan middle classes – more likely to encounter a cricket match or sculling (rowing) contest than a pack of hounds in full chase – news of the hunt and the shooting party were to provide a standard narrative within the mix that made up the *ILN*'s sporting agenda in the middle decades of the century. It was an upper-class narrative redolent with ideas of skill, pluck, manners, tradition, robust endurance and manly virtues – and bloodletting. As such, the *ILN*'s coverage of sport provides a valuable grandstand from which to observe the marking out of the boundaries of acceptable endeavour and interest

for the sports-minded Victorian middle and upper classes. The paper's interpretation of the place of sport within society, of its worth, grants the modern reader entree to the deer parks of the aristocracy and the private enclosures and exclusive marquees of the well off and well connected at the regatta, racecourse and public school cricket match.

## The Changing Sporting Panorama

At some remove from the perceived glamour and cachet of the leisured classes at play, the *ILN* made space to record the pursuit of athletic prowess in the shape of professional rowing, pedestrianism (running and walking challenges), cricket and swimming contests, plus indoor games of skill such as billiards. Nationally, the range of organised contests expanded as the century progressed with the lower-middle and upper-working class demand for sporting entertainment, in terms of both playing and spectating, creating a thriving commercial scene. Improvements in diet, transport, communication, wage levels, hours of work and industrial technology all contributed to the changing sporting panorama. But the *ILN* held itself aloof from too close an affinity with sport in its new commercialised format, especially so when, in summer 1874, the paper announced its acquisition of the recently launched *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*.

Regular *ILN* ads for the *Sporting and Dramatic* were to highlight its stablemate's coverage of athletics, cricket, coursing, fishing, hunting, racing, rowing, shooting, yachting and polo. The link with a new weekly title, also priced at 6d, dedicated to the world of sport and leisure

signalled a gradual withdrawal by the *ILN* from its own engagement with the fast-developing popular sporting calendar over the next 10 years. The link provided scope for economies. For example, the *ILN*'s coverage of Captain Matthew Webb's thrilling cross-Channel endurance swim in 1875 consisted of a report lifted wholesale from *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* columns to sit alongside illustrations of the feat. The *ILN*'s regular 'National Sports' column, an often brief round-up of sporting news that had featured for more than 40 years, finished its run in 1884.

The *ILN* continued to include sporting news scattered throughout its pages, but in a much reduced and a more occasional format, although the great society gatherings and athletic spectacles that had become attached to the national sports programme, and that lent themselves to illustrated coverage, continued to command attention.

### Men and Women in Victorian Sport

The *ILN*'s coverage of Victorian sport had a distinctly male bias, reflecting as it did the dominant social attitudes of the period and the limited opportunities available to women of all classes to play sport – opportunities that for the middle classes were invariably linked to social gatherings, private sporting clubs, and the business of finding a husband. See the 1842 archery report for an early mention of successful female competitors.

### Popular Sports depicted in the *ILN*

#### 'The Turf'

Away from the grand sporting events demanding illustration, an idea of the *ILN*'s reporting style and of the range of activities covered at the height of its engagement with sport can be gained through the article title search term **National Sports**, giving access to a regular column of news. A similar search for **Epsom, Ascot, Goodwood** and **Newmarket** opens up the racing and social calendar to scrutiny, including the associated comings and goings of the social elite, often with illustrations. The Epsom coverage of 3 June, 1843, and 26 May, 1883, for example, reveal the *ILN*'s hallmark synergy of sport and society. Of all sports, coverage of the turf was the most frequent. News of the latest betting odds, form, gossip and race results surrounding the leading meetings, together with bloodstock sales, was presented in a chatty, informal style, hinting at privileged knowledge. The turf writers strived to cultivate a shrewd and worldly air, seemingly honed by prolonged exposure to the wiles and pitfalls of racegoing and betting. The use of search terms (entire document) **betting** and **odds**, and **betting** and **racing** brings to light examples of the *ILN*'s dalliance with the turf and gambling.

#### Coursing

The title search term **coursing** opens up the competitive hunting of hares with dogs, especially in the decades spanning 1900. It was a pastime with popular appeal across all classes, in part due to its association with gambling, and the Altcar meeting in Lancashire for the Waterloo Cup features strongly.

## The University Boat Race

A sporting event with similar cross-class appeal, despite its elitist origins, and one still commanding popular interest today, can be accessed with the title search term **university boat race**. The annual Thames rowing race between crews from Oxford and Cambridge had obvious appeal for the *ILN* due to a combination of athletic prowess, keen competition and upper-class patronage. The event lent itself to illustrated coverage, as the 1902 race and the 1907 race testify.

## Pedestrianism

To get a flavour of the novelty and showmanship attached to the developing world of popular sports in Victorian Britain, the use of **pedestrianism** as an entire document search term opens up a sub-culture of athletic challenges for prize money, with competitors, such as 'The Phenomenon' and the 'Brighton Shepherd', tackling a variety of tests – walking seven miles and running nine in two hours, or walking 1,000 miles in 1,000 hours, with breaks to eat and sleep. Richard Manks entertained the crowds at Kennington Oval in 1851 with a 22-day endurance walking feat fortified by a diet of, '... game and poultry, roast beef and steaks, mutton and chops &c; strong beef tea he drank in considerable quantities. Old ale was his favourite beverage; and he took tea with brandy in it during the night'. At one stage he had 'cried like a child' and refused to continue, before completing 1,000 miles in less than '1,000 consecutive half-hours' (to read the whole article see 8 November 1851, p. 573). Further examples include a contest in Islington in 1877 when the two athletes carried a pair of bone castanets and a

'slight cane or switch', perhaps as aids to ward off sleep and combat mental stress (see 14 April 1877, p. 355).

## Team Sports

Turning to team sports, both cricket and football (a term taking in both rugby and soccer) were seen by the *ILN* in 1887 as serving a wider purpose. Both were regarded as 'noble manly games', and '... likely to be serviceable to the future officer and to the common soldier; for the one exhibits, in its fielding, the necessity of outpost vigilance and alacrity, as well as the individual prowess of the bowler and batsman in the attack and defence of a guarded position at the wicket – and football, in which all soldiers ought to be encouraged to amuse themselves, is the best possible imitation of an actual assault and hand-to-hand combat on the battlefield' (see 26 February 1887, p. 242).

## Cricket

**Cricket** as an article title search term produces an array of references revealing the game's centrality to the Victorian sporting set, although, for the *ILN*, much of its coverage places cricket in its social context of festival and school match. The article carried on 23 July, 1842 highlights a significant stage in the game's development with an exhibition match at Lord's between exponents of 'the fast and slow systems of bowling', or underarm and overarm styles. In 1888, the *ILN* carried a tribute to cricket's first super star, the prolific run scorer W G Grace, hailing him 'undeniably the king of cricket'. (On the subject of sporting stardom and celebrity see also the article on champion jockey Fred Archer's suicide in 1886). The Australian

touring team played a lengthy series of matches across England in 1888, with the *ILN* carrying an illustration of the tourists in the 12 May issue, but news of the matches merited a paltry coverage totalling less than 50 lines throughout the summer, evidence of the paper's growing ambivalence regarding sport.

## Football

An article title search for **football** (resulting in 123 matches, compared to more than 2,600 for an entire document search), can be used to help trace the development of the games of rugby and soccer from their shared public school and folk festival roots through to the staging of international games, although the *ILN* coverage can, more often than not, be surprisingly cursory. It is perhaps in terms of early accompanying illustrations that the footballing codes receive their most prominent treatment; see, for example, the depictions in 25 November 1871, 14 January 1882, 26 February 1887, 28 March 1891, 27 April 1901; plus 12 April 1902, p.515 and 12 April 1902, p.520 for soccer's first great stadium tragedy, the stand collapse at Ibrox Park, Glasgow, in 1902, reported on. For England's finest soccer triumph, victory in the World Cup of 1966, see 6 August 1966. The 1968 illustrated feature on Chelsea FC defender Ron Harris, under the headline '£140 a week if you're worth it', addresses issues of pay and lifestyle, topics that still resonate in modern press coverage.

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