

## Education and football in the parish oratories of Milan (1944-1968)

### Educazione e calcio negli oratori milanesi (1944-1968)

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abstract

In post-WWII Italy, Catholic educational networks were among the first youth settings to be instrumental in popularising sport, especially football. This phenomenon can be observed at the parish oratories of Milan, which offer an interesting case study, given their well-established tradition of providing education and the socio-economic transformation which occurred in the city during the years of Italy's economic miracle. In fact, as documented by the archival and print sources drawn on in this paper, the position occupied by modern football in the consumer society represented a challenge for the Milanese oratories, which had to contend with the new ways in which young people were engaging with and perceiving football. The historical reconstruction offered here is intended to throw light on a crucial issue for pedagogical reflection, which – as much today as in the past – is called upon to inquire into the educational potential and risks of sport.

**Keywords:** football, history of Catholic popular education, oratories, Milan, twentieth century

Nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra, i circuiti educativi cattolici furono uno dei primi ambienti giovanili in cui si iniziò a diffondere lo sport di massa, e specialmente il calcio. Questo fenomeno caratterizzò anche gli oratori milanesi, che costituiscono un interessante caso di studio per la loro radicata tradizione formativa e per le trasformazioni socio-economiche che interessarono il capoluogo lombardo negli anni del boom economico. Infatti, come documentano le fonti archivistiche e a stampa prese in esame per questo contributo, l'affermazione del calcio moderno nella società dei consumi rappresentò una sfida per gli oratori milanesi, che dovettero misurarsi con le nuove modalità con cui il calcio veniva giocato dai giovani e percepito dal loro immaginario. La ricostruzione storica che il saggio presenta intende gettare luce su una questione cruciale per la riflessione pedagogica che, oggi come nel passato, è chiamata a interrogarsi sulle potenzialità e i rischi educativi dello sport.

**Parole chiave:** calcio, Storia dell'educazione popolare cattolica, Oratori, Milano; XX secolo

The question of the educational value of sport – one marked by much value-related and socio-political ambivalence – is very much a historical one, as argued by Johan Huizinga in his famous book *Homo ludens* (1939). According to the Dutch scholar, the mass practice of sport in the contemporary era brought to light the contradiction between sport's origins as a form of play and its subsequent development into a competitive activity and form of entertainment.

In Italy, the latter process became evident during the years of the so-called economic miracle, when the mentality and lifestyle of the consumer society came to increasingly influence the world of sport, accentuating the mistrust that it had always inspired in educational settings and especially in schools, where gymnastics had traditionally been viewed as the most suitable form of physical education for youth (Bonetta, 1990; 2000; Ferrara, 1992).

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the debate on the relative merits of gymnastic exercises and sport remained lively among Italian teachers (Grifi, 1989, pp. 380-386; Teja, 2009, pp. 48-51)<sup>1</sup> as well as among their peers in other European countries, including Spain (Torrebadella Flix, 2012) and France (Gomet-Attali, 2018). This, combined with conservative ministerial guidelines and poor school infrastructure, slowed down the introduction of sport into the Italian schools of the period (Morandi, 2015, pp. 36-40).

As a result, the main setting in which young Italians had the opportunity to play sports was the educational network of the Catholic Church, and especially its parish oratories (Fabrizio, 1977, pp. 133-148). The oratories, particularly in the north of Italy, drew a broad cross-section of the youth, offering them access to a large number of sports fields, which were predominantly used for football<sup>2</sup> (Russi, 1984; Papa-Panico, 2000, pp. 20-37).

Within this general scenario, the Milanese oratories were undoubtedly of key significance. The encounter between given their well-rooted educational tradition and the profound socio-economic changes sweeping

1 About the origins of this debate in Italy between the XIX and the XX centuries, see Gori (1990), Papa (1992, pp. 18-19) and Elia (2014).

2 In 1955, the 4.074 oratories of Northern Italy boasted 1.326 sports fields, those of Central Italy 422, the Southern Italian oratories 192, and those on the main islands 77: see Falconi, 1956, pp. 407-408.

Lombardy's main city in the 1950s and 1960s represents an interesting object of inquiry, including in relation to the practice of football. The archival and print sources drawn on in this paper – with the aim of laying the ground for an even broader inquiry into the topic – document the wide-scale diffusion of football in Milan's parish oratories, where, as we shall see, this sport maintained a secure lead even when its progressive modernisation began to pose new challenges to the oratories' educational mission.

## 1. The original and intrinsic educational calling of oratory football

Sports and gymnastics were present in various forms in Milan's oratories from the early 1900s (Alfieri, 2011, pp. 211-230)<sup>3</sup>, but gathered new momentum in the period immediately following the Second World War, when, as mentioned above, football began to take centre stage. Indeed, as early as August 1944, Archbishop Schuster criticized young priests for wasting too much energy organising football matches, at the risk – in the Cardinal's view – of diminishing the essentially religious role of the oratory (1944).

Schuster issued this admonition in the same year that the Centro Sportivo Italiano (CSI) was founded in Rome as a publicity organization associated with the Gioventù Italiana di Azione Cattolica. The new body was to coordinate all Catholic-organized sports activities at the national level (Pivato, 1988; Greganti, 2006, pp. 27-59), thus directly expressing the orientation of the Church hierarchy and also that Pope Pius XII, who despite his reflection on the educational value of sport, saw it also as a means of "Catholicizing society in the full sense" (Malgeri, 1984, p. 133).

Hence, the CSI – in the early years of its existence – played a key role in the sphere of "Catholic collateralism" because, in that period of strong ideological conflict, it was needed to counteract the influence of new sports organizations associated with left-wing political forces and coordinated by the communist Unione Italiana Sportiva Popolare (Archambault, 2012a, pp. 19-175).

3 Among the various studies on the history of the Milanese oratories in the twentieth century, the following is among the most recent: Alfieri-Polenghi, 2015; in particular, about 1950s and 1960s, see Caimi (2006), Riboldi (2015) and Mattioni (2015).

But the Catholic commitment to sport went beyond an indirect, albeit important, form of self-promotion within society, as reflected in the activism of the Milanese oratories, which gave many young people the opportunity to play football during a period in which “it was not yet the most popular sport in Italy” (Archambault, 2012b, p. 191; see also Papa, 1988, p. 140). Indeed, immediately after the Liberation, the diocesan authorities founded the Centro Sportivo Ambrosiano (CSA), which, independently of the CSI, organized, between 1945 and 1946, six-a-side and eleven-a-side football leagues with the participation of 144 teams (Giuntini, 1991, pp. 95-96)<sup>4</sup>.

Even after, in 1947, the push from Rome for centralization led the CSA to be converted into the Milanese provincial committee of the CSI (Landoni, 2008, pp. 38-42), the Milanese oratories did not view football merely as a means of attracting and involving young people, but went on attempting to emphasize its educational potential.

The information brochure produced for the 1951 Football Tournament for teens and youths attending the diocesan oratories contained the admission that football was the most attractive sport and contaminated by a “widespread disease”, that is to say, “the false presumption of easy popularity and even easier earnings”; football was even defined as an “instinctive” game, to the extent that many youths expected to be able to play it without any specific training. But, despite these defects, priests and their collaborators were not recommended to reject football. On the contrary, they were called upon to work towards renewed recognition of the importance of technical preparation, and also – especially – of the values that football could help young people to develop. As a “team sport”, football fostered solidarity among its players, helping them to overcome individualism, given that on the pitch they were necessarily united by a common objective (C.S.-C.S.I., 1951, p. 11).

Hence the following appeal made to the young people planning to participate in the tournament:

Forgo “likely” personal feats and pass the ball to a teammate who is objectively in the more favourable position. Remember that a

4 The rules for these leagues are reported in CSA (1945).

match is not won by, say, Nordahl<sup>5</sup>, but by A.C. Milan. The effort required to dribble the ball past an opponent is wasted when he could have been passed out by making an easy pass to a teammate. A spectacular bicycle kick, whose outcome is always uncertain, is useless and counterproductive, when you have all the time in the world to stop the ball and decide where best to pass it (ibid.).

In short, football was viewed as intrinsically educational, and not only when played in a Church setting. Certainly, the CSI and the Federazione degli Oratori Milanesi (FOM) also offered specific religious formation as well as organizing events that made Catholic sport visible to the public. But, according to those with ultimate responsibility for the pastoral care of the Milanese youth, football – and sport in general – was not a mere adjunct to actual religious formation projects: sports activities contributed to making the oratory “a centre of interest for the youth of the town or parish” and therefore fostered young people’s overall formation<sup>6</sup> (ivi, p. 1).

For this reason too, the Milanese branch of CSI and FOM launched a major organizational campaign to promote oratory football, attaining particularly impressive results in the period spanning the late 1950s and the entire decade of the 1960s, as reflected in the bigger volume of teams participating in the various football leagues – both seven-a-side and eleven-a-side – open to the oratories of the diocese<sup>7</sup>, while the spring and evening tournaments increased the number of participating groups even further.

- 5 Gunnar Nordahl (1921-1995) was a famous Dutch footballer then playing centre-forward with A.C. Milan.
- 6 The notion of making the oratory an environment for the integral formation of the youth had its roots in the early twentieth century, when the educational programs of the Milan diocese youth ministry ceased to be informed by a purely instrumental understanding of recreational activities (see Alfieri, 2011). It came to the fore again in the early 1950s, this time featuring the lexicon and some of the core ideas of the progressive education movement, which the Milanese oratories were then engaging with, as documented in some of the talks delivered at the VI Diocesan Congress of boys’ and girls’ oratories in 1953 and published in the diocesan magazine *Eco degli Oratori* in 1953-54.
- 7 The football leagues run by the Milan branch of CSI attracted the participation of 60 teams in 1953-54, 112 in 1957-58, 237 in 1962-63, and 254 in 1968-1969: see CSI (1954; 1959; 1963) and CSI (1971).

## 2. Oratory football and the socio-economic challenges of the 1960s

The quantitative increase in football in the Milanese parish oratories occurred in parallel with the profound changes that, in the course of the 1960s, marked both Italian football generally and the socio-economic fabric of the diocese, especially the city of Milan itself.

The national football scene, meanwhile, “had begun to change face”, mainly due to the official professionalization of the premier leagues (1959), the transformation of football clubs into joint-stock companies (1967), and the large-scale expansion of the Italian Football Federation, whose membership rose by 130% between 1961 and 1969 (Papa-Panico, 2000, p. 77). These developments, which accentuated the economic and commercial dimensions of Italian football, were compounded by the growing spectacularization of the sport. The latter phenomenon was helped by the spread of automobiles, made it easier to travel to stadiums, and the spread of television, which meant that fans could now watch the most important matches from their homes (Fabrizio, 1977, p. 193).

As is well known, the new patterns of consumption had a strong impact on Milan, the capital of the Italian economic miracle: while Milanese families enjoyed a general increase in income and a marked diversification in their leisure time and leisure activities (Petrillo, 1995), the city also had to deal with the challenges of migration (between 1951 and 1966 the city’s population increased by 400,000 units) (Foot, 2003, p. 58).

Faced with these changes, which on the one hand threatened to undermine the playful and selfless spirit of football, and on the other, posed unprecedented challenges to the Church’s educational networks, the Milanese oratories remained faithful to their vocation to minister to the working-class people, which prompted them to attend to the new social and formational needs of the youth, including young immigrants.

In addition to citing the entreaties of the Italian bishops and the archbishops of Milan concerning their social mission (Episcopato Italiano, 1962; Pellin, 1964)<sup>8</sup>, the oratories’ journalistic publications unfailingly emphasized that the oratories already had sufficient resources to accom-

8 On the social magisterium of the archbishops of Milan (Montini and Colombo) in the early 1960s, see at least Del Zanna (2016) and Rumi (1982).

moderate the newcomers: it was only a matter of using – so they claimed – “all the instruments” that “for some time now” had been available to them (ivi, p. 18; see also Caroli, 1963). Among these instruments, football, given its strong appeal, was an activity that could help to integrate the Milanese youth with their newly arrived peers.

Therefore, if they were to foster the social integration process and, in any case, go on encouraging the youth to actively frequent church settings during a historic period increasingly marked by secularization, the Milanese branch of the CSI and FOM were obliged to engage with the changes stemming from football’s newfound status as the national sport in a consumer society.

The sources analysed for this paper suggest that those in charge of the Milanese oratory network displayed what might be termed an ambiguous attitude towards football. First, when plans were underway to construct new oratories in the city, the documentary sources feature both advertising for contractors that specialized in building sports fields and criticisms of the excessive space devoted to football pitches in the oratories’ grounds, at the expense of spaces for “smaller children or alternative sports” (Carcano, 1965, p. 368).

Similarly, while priests and educators were recommended to encourage the practice of other sports now considered to be of greater formative value than football – such as volleyball, tennis, and especially basketball (Longoni, 1962; Carcano, 1965; Ceresa, 1965) – the diocesan magazines of oratories published expert analyses of refereeing decisions in recent premier league games (Zardin-Zenati, 1963) and premier league football market news (Zenati-Zardin, 1963).

Finally, the attitude displayed towards top-level footballers and their popularity was also marked by ambivalence. The sources condemn the economic interests driving professional football, negative behaviour on the part of football fans (C.G. Di Lomazzo, 1964), and the excessive glorification of the footballers themselves:

The victorious athlete is often hailed as a “hero”, when he is not called “prodigious”, “fantastic”, “unbelievable”, “miraculous”, and on with an incredibly magnanimous range of adjectives that are based on minor anecdotes and create demigods. [...] Thus, however the spiritual sensibility of sport vanishes, fading away in tandem with the rise of the demigods to the Olympus of the illustrated magazines (Dani, 1965).

At the same time, however, we can observe the showcasing in the sources of successful players who started out in the ranks of the CSI, later becoming professional footballers and members of the Italian football team, such as Bruno Bolchi, Mario Corso, Massimo Giacomini, Giacomo Bulgarelli, Giacinto Facchetti, William Negri (Gli Azzurri, 1962; Estratto, 1967; 1968). This approach was certainly intended to offer positive role models – albeit not on a par with the cyclist Gino Bartali, who, as is well-known, had been identified as the Catholic sports personality par excellence (Pivato, 1985) – and to prove that the oratory football scene could yield champions too.

Nonetheless, we are bound to remark that the prominence given to these very role models likely impacted on the imaginary of the youths attending the oratories, fuelling both the illusion that a career in football was accessible to them, and the tendency to hero-worship the big players. This effect is likely to have been further amplified by the oratories' promotion of football sticker albums brought out by AVE – the publishing house of Gioventù Italiana di Azione Cattolica (Tutti i calciatori, 1965) – and by the well-known football column in *Il Giornalino*, the popular Catholic youth magazine, which often featured photographs of premier league football stars<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. Conclusions: educational aims and young people's experience

The ambivalences that characterized the Milanese oratories' attitude to football in the course of the 1960s might be interpreted in light of a broader historiographical hypothesis which – in relation to Catholic educational environments in post-WWII Italy – posits an “accelerated loss of cohesion between what was prescribed and what was experienced” (Tassani, 1997, pp. 171-172; see also Traniello, 1988); in other words, in relation to our focus of interest here, a loss of cohesion between the aspiration to conserve football's authentic educational vocation and the con-

9 See, for example, the column “I calciatori vi insegnano le regole” (Footballers teach you the rules), inserts with photographs of premier league players, and the article “Alleluia per la nazionale” (Alleluia for the national football team) (*Il Giornalino della domenica*, n. 50, 1966 and nn. 7 & 13, 1967).

crete ways in which young people were experiencing the sport, in terms of how it was now practiced and how it attracted social interest based on a consumerist mentality that was partially endorsed by the oratories themselves.

Acceptance of this interpretive lens might lead us to posit that this loss of cohesion had long-term effects, as suggested by Fabien Archambault in relation to a scene from the well-known film *La messa è finita* (1985)<sup>10</sup> directed by Nanni Moretti:

The young priest who had just arrived from the seminary settles into an empty and abandoned Roman parish; the noise of children playing football in the dilapidated oratory wakes him from his nap. He joins them and wants to play with them and tries a few dribbles but they push him over, trample him and continue their game (Archambault, 2006, p. 150).

The conclusion reached by the French historian – “the young Italians did not need an *oratorio* any more to kick a ball” (ibid.) – might prompt us to theorize a sort of heterogenetic development in the oratories’ investment in football: while in the late 1940s and early 1950s, they represented the first setting in which Italian youth had the opportunity to practice soccer, three decades on, their role and capacity to wield a decisive educational influence in this field had become marginal.

While this theory is certainly compelling, it requires further and more in-depth research to be confirmed. Meanwhile, coming back to 1960s Milan, we can safely affirm that modern football, in its consumerist guise, conditioned and, in some respects, overtook the original educational sport approach of the Milanese oratories. At the same time, however, it is undeniable that large numbers of young people frequented the grounds of the Milanese oratories, attracted there most especially by football, both organised and informal, with the latter playing no small part.

In 1966, the diocesan magazine of the Milanese oratories carried an interview with Cardinal Ottaviani, who spoke about the history of St. Peter’s Oratory in Rome, then being demolished to make way for an au-

10 Archambault mistakenly dated the film to 1979.

ditorium to host papal audiences. The Cardinal related that, in the 1920s, he and Monsignor Borgoncini Duca used to gather a group of youths around a “ball”, using “piles of stones to mark the goalposts of an impromptu football field” (Addio, 1966, p. 644). And, almost as though to remind the Milanese priests and their collaborators of the original educational and social value of oratory football, the cardinal went on recounting his memories:

A crowd of kids eager to play all day long, running after a leather ball [...] With that ball and much good will, we managed to do good to many abandoned children, who had no connection with the parishes [...] And the common folk, who are always able to grasp and express the heart of a situation, amused themselves by calling those rascals the “sacred rogues” (ibid.).

Although it is difficult to document the phenomenon based on the sources alone, the “few kicks of the football” characterized the everyday life of the oratories, both those that took part in the CSI-organized leagues and those lacking the logistical structure to do so.

One way or another, the Milanese youth ministry networks attracted a large number of young people who, thanks in part to the opportunity to play football, continued to attend their local oratory, an environment that offered them opportunities for personal growth and socialization, or – at the very least – an alternative to the streets.

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