Playing for the Nation
The Ideology of Brazilian Sports

In Decree-Law 3199 of April 14, 1941, Getúlio Vargas established the Conselho Nacional de Desportos (CND, National Sports Council). Vargas had taken power in 1930, toppling the government of Brazil's First Republic (installed in 1889) and building a regime dedicated to centralization and state-sponsored development. This process culminated in 1937, when Vargas swept away the last vestiges of the republican system and established his Estado Novo, or New State. An explicitly authoritarian government, the Estado Novo aimed at destroying partisanship and regionalism, rationalizing public administration, and giving the nation a sense of common purpose under Vargas' paternalistic direction. The sports council was one part of this larger effort, tasked to reorganize and “discipline” sports administration, to promote amateur athletics, to supervise professional sports, to direct Brazil’s participation in international competitions, and to oversee public investment in sports programs.

In organizing the CND, the Vargas state annexed sports to its nationalist project and asserted that previous governments had failed to understand sports’ role in creating a greater Brazil. For decades Brazilian sports had been rent by administrative conflicts, for example, between promoters of amateur sports and professionalization and between partisans of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Among other consequences, these conflicts had compromised Brazilian participation in international contests, most famously in the first two editions of the football World Cup. In 1930 regional disputes meant the
national team was constituted almost exclusively by players drawn from the capital, and in 1934 the team did not include many of the country’s best players because of a conflict over the installation of professional football the year before. At home, professional football monopolized public attention and scarce resources, allegedly leaving amateurs demoralized and underfunded, while professional leagues themselves required, according to the regime, “rigorous vigilance” in order to fight corruption and maintain them “within the principles of strict morality.”

Vargas and his allies had begun to address these problems soon after taking power in 1930, expressing concern about fractiousness among sports administrators, promoting physical education, and providing assistance to Brazilian athletes taking part in international contests. During the following decade, the state steadily expanded its role in sports, for example, by reviewing competition rules and player transfers; Vargas believed it was “necessary to coordinate and discipline” sports, especially football, because they promoted “the harmony of national consciousness.” The CND was the culmination of these efforts, a national solution to national—and seemingly intractable—problems, and it therefore possessed expansive powers to match its weighty responsibilities. In a hierarchical manner typical of the Vargas state, the CND organized confederations that oversaw every “sports” activity, from football to fencing, from basketball to chess. In turn, these confederations brought together federations that administered sports at the state level, federations that oversaw leagues organized at the municipal level, and leagues that brought together individual sports clubs, each and every one of which was obligated to participate in a scheme designed to provide Brazil a coordinated, effective, and nationalist sports bureaucracy that might overcome decades of disorganization, inefficiency, and disunity.

Having complained for years about private-sector sports administrators and their seeming unwillingness to cooperate with one another, the sports-writer Thomaz Mazzoni championed the initiative, insisting that the state must act because only it could guarantee that sport was what it should be, dedicated to “the service of the nation.” Members of the government extended the argument. In the words of João Alberto Lins de Barros of the Ministry of Education and Health, the state took an interest in sports because sports were a matter of national health and national well-being. They were one of the “pillars of the improvement of the race, improving the physical condition of the individual, making him capable of work, and necessary for the development of collective education and of collaborative spirit
among youth.” They could help keep youth away from criminality, developing their character both morally and physically. Echoing Lins de Barros’ view of sports’ role in promoting a “collaborative spirit,” influential educator and eugenicist Fernando de Azevedo, who helped organize another Estado Novo project, the Escola Nacional de Educação Física e Desportos (National School of Physical Education and Sports) in 1939, argued that sports could bring the nation together. They were a “powerful force for national unity, an instrument for the consolidation of political union, whose base is established on the fundamental harmony of a developing people.” Finally, Col. Mario Ary Pires said that because of the demands they placed on athletes, certain sports could “through the discipline of the stadium motivate soldiers to adopt battlefield discipline.”

Sports could, in short, educate and improve Brazil and Brazilians, developing individuals and building the nation. The decree made this clear, situating the CND within the Ministry of Education and Health and stating explicitly that its overriding concern must be to “make sports into an ever more efficient process of physical and moral education for young people and a lofty expression of national culture and energy.”

The Vargas state depicted its actions as transformative, and in some ways they were. Among other changes, many of which echoed interventions taken by Vargas’ populist counterparts in Mexico after its revolution and in Argentina under Juan Perón, the 1941 law centralized sports administration, which originally had been established at the local level and had remained mostly regional in scope into the 1930s. It expanded the role of the national government in the administration and the promotion of sports. And it established formal conditions on participation in Brazilian sports. Women were banned from “sports incompatible with the conditions of their nature,” which in practice meant the end of then-recent experiments in women’s football. And it attempted to ensure that Brazilians would dominate Brazilian sports, the law allowing each professional team to field one foreign player and obligating foreign-born administrators and coaches to obtain formal CND permission to work in Brazil.

The thinking behind these reforms was not, however, actually new. For example, Washington Luís Pereira de Sousa, the Paulista who Getúlio Vargas removed from the presidency, was a well-known supporter of sport and physical education and had done much to promote them during his tenure as governor of São Paulo and president of Brazil. Washington Luís’ 1920 gubernatorial platform spoke both of man’s “obligation to be strong” and the
Figure 1.1. “Olympic Day” celebration organized by the Confederação Brasileira Desportos, June 19, 1932, held at the stadium of the Fluminense Football Club. By permission of the Acervo Flu-Memória.
state's obligation to provide physical education, and it directly connected improvement to sport, arguing that “the creation of a sporting society has as much social value as the creation of a school." Further, contrary to the accusations that the Vargas movement would assert against him and his mostly Paulista supporters, Luís’ platform did not speak in regional terms. Instead, it said that Luís’ government would “fortify and, above all, Brazilianize the Brazilian,” meaning, it seems, that through the promotion of sport and physical education, the government would train Paulistas to see themselves as Brazilians, better able to fulfill Brazil’s needs as members of a national community.8

Washington Luís carried this commitment to Rio de Janeiro when he became president, for example, by appointing as mayor of the capital his fellow Paulista Antônio Prado Júnior, scion of one of Brazil’s most powerful families and, as the longtime president of the Club Athletico Paulistano, one of the country’s leading football figures. As mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Prado Júnior oversaw the 1928 reform of the capital’s educational system, an important part of which was the mandate that all government schools provide physical education for their students. To lead the renovation as director of public instruction, Prado Júnior appointed Fernando de Azevedo, who would go on to work with the Vargas regime in the reorganization of sport and physical education in Brazil as a whole. Azevedo’s work helped bridge what seemed to many to be opposed regimes; the 1928 Rio de Janeiro educational reform, in fact, served as a model for the rest of the country during the Vargas years.9

Across decades and the political divide, sports’ promoters shared a vision of sports as a form of education, a means of building individual bodies and the nation, and as a way of bringing Brazilians together. This complicates claims made by the Vargas state and its allies that it was taking the country in a new, even revolutionary direction. But those claims were forceful and convincing enough that they had a great influence on accounts of Brazil in the 1930s and 1940s, including narratives of Brazilian football, to render the era as a period of nationalist, populist transformation overturning decades of elitist and Eurocentric mimicry. For example, historian Darién J. Davis states that in the 1930s, “As the state and more Brazilians from the popular and middle sectors became involved in the sport, soccer became Brazilianized as Brazilians eventually ‘devoured’ its foreign elements,” which had dominated the game from its introduction to the country in 1894.10

There were significant changes in Brazilian sport in the 1930s, including a challenge to the participation of foreigners as players, coaches, and administrators. As the passages above suggest, though, promoters of sport and
physical education in the Vargas regime had more in common with their predecessors in the First Republic than they were likely to admit. While they often insisted they were “Brazilianizing” Brazilian sport, their ideas about the reform of sports administration were partly inspired by central and southern European fascist models. While they often spoke as populists and promoted racial integration, they also believed that working-class, nonwhite, and female athletes required the guidance of their social, cultural, and political betters. The hierarchical, gendered sports bureaucracy of the CND thus helped to reinforce the regime’s efforts in taming workers and “restructuring patriarchy” in order to save it in the face of challenges to traditional gender roles in a modernizing Brazil.

There was also more nationalism in the thinking of their First Republic forerunners than the nationalists of the 1930s acknowledged. It is true that for some wealthy devotees, football and other imported sports were part of what Jeffrey Needell calls elite Brazilians’ “fantasy of civilization,” in which they imagined for themselves cosmopolitan lives guided by European fashion, often ignoring the Brazilian reality before their eyes. And in building Brazilian sport, they limited the participation of working people and people of color, their notions about building a modern Brazil, as José Murilo de Carvalho says, “allergic” to the idea that the majority of Brazilian people had the capacity to fully inhabit modern life. It is also clear that many early enthusiasts hoped that football and other sports could help redeem the Brazilian people, that if Brazilians could learn to play sports in the proper way, they could help make Brazil a great nation. In this they shared the cautious optimism of Brazilian scientists and doctors who were heavily influenced by European determinist doctrines in doubting the character of their countrymen but who ultimately rejected the notion that the national character was fixed and inferior. Instead, certain Brazilian scientists and medical practitioners adapted foreign ideas to their projects of improving Brazilians and building a greater Brazil. Some, like Fernando de Azevedo, made it explicitly clear that sports and physical education were vital to their work.

When they spoke of sports, all of these Brazilians—unapologetic Europhiles at the turn of the century, activist eugenicists in the 1910s and 1920s, and strident nationalists in the 1930s—spoke in terms of improvement, education, and training; of individual discipline and collective responsibility; of sports, and of football especially, as exceptionally productive in making Brazilians better workers, better soldiers, and better citizens. This chapter explores the meaning of sports to these commentators and activists during the
period from football’s arrival in Brazil in 1894 to the Vargas years, and it demonstrates the consistency of sports ideology throughout this period. This is sometimes missed because of the real changes of the 1930s and 1940s, such as administrative reform and professionalization, and because of the more obvious rhetorical differences that characterized the different generations; Vargas-era ideologues were more likely to make emphatic claims about patriotism and nationality than their predecessors had done. As the nationalism of Washington Luis and the discipline and hierarchy of the CND suggest, however, these years were characterized by constancy as much as change, something that the history of Brazilian football does much to reveal.16

Sport, Physical Education, and the Gospel of Progress

Brazilians played football and other sports because they enjoyed them. But the fun and excitement of sports can explain only so much about the reasons for their adoption by Brazilians or about the ways in which Brazilians pursued them. And they do little to explain the speed and intensity with which Brazilians embraced the sporting life, which left some contemporaries bewildered, in part because sports represented a significant challenge to old models of comportment for respectable men and women. In 1865 the British editor of Rio de Janeiro’s Anglo-Brazilian Times complained of what seemed to him the absolute neglect of sport and exercise among middle- and upper-class Brazilians. He believed that these Brazilians had developed an aversion to physical exertion due to the devaluation of manual labor during the country’s long experience of slavery. The “true Brazilian,” he asserted, saw exercise as “degrading to himself and to his position of ‘gentility’ seeking to prove his aristocratic claims,” and Brazilian youth were therefore willing to allow both mind and body “to degenerate and become emasculated through their indolence and contempt for usefulness.” The writer bemoaned that Brazil’s educated classes lacked both an interest in exercise and, more importantly, the work ethic that he believed physical exercise helped produce.17

Brazilian commentators shared the British writer’s assessment of the faults of their well-to-do countrymen and noticed that the problem persisted as late as the 1880s. Looking back from 1905, social critic João do Rio noted that some Brazilians, especially working-class Afro-Brazilians, had exercised in the nineteenth century in the form of the martial art of capoeira. But wealthy Brazilians had disregarded all forms of exercise, he said, believing that capoeira, like physical labor, “was exclusively for the lower class.”18