The Neapolitan Tradition of Yacht Clubs

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Circolo del Reno e della Vela Italia is the oldest among the Neapolitan yacht clubs. It was founded in 1889 on the initiative of a group of young golden boys from Naples, mainly belonging to the aristocracy of the time, to gather and meet guests and people from abroad and compete in rowing. The first competitions were among crews of the same association, then, the fishermen of the gozzos, the traditional fishing boats of our region, became the new contestants, and finally new clubs were founded—in chronological order: Yacht Club Canottieri Savoia, Circolo Nautico della Vela, Circolo Canottieri Napoli, Circolo Nautico Posillipo, and others afterwards—so that the athletes could compete in regular contests. Sailing arose almost immediately alongside rowing, and thus they became two sides of a single soul: rowers and sailors, both sharing a common inspiration, the social soul. Rowers took care of their bodies, some of them to not only win games but also to impress girls, while the most idealistic of them dreamt of the glory of the Olympic games, the most sublime moment for every sportsman. Sailors in such a seaside city, a true paradise—especially the small nook of Santa Lucia (Figure 1)—desired to learn to navigate the seas. The most ambitious of them dreamt of winning fleet races or of distant seas.

What has affected this environment more than anything else has been the presence of professional seamen, who enabled the sports clubs to function to their fullest. Indeed, they had very different origins, certainly neither bourgeois nor patrician, and they were so strong in their competencies and family traditions that they have always served as a reference for the subsequent generations who learned from them the meaning of the sea. In order to have a full understanding of what this social contiguity created, it is important to understand that in our regions, the oldest heart of Europe beats. Since about the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, social diversification, not necessarily based on wealth, has been a tangible and basically inevitable reality. Compared to central and northern European societies, a great capacity for communication between different social classes is equally still attainable. This capacity has always acted as both a cause and an effect of the tension to relate to and participate in things happening in the other part of the world. This twofold tension—social differentiation and tension in the relations—has always been coupled in the yacht clubs with a recognition of the role of masters to seamen. This social inhomogeneity has instilled values, fascination, and habits that feature and describe, better than anything else, the historical Neapolitan yacht clubs. The emulation of masters has thus combined, without setting against, some often opposing qualities: agonist technique and nautical skills; amateur passion and actual accountability; competitive tension and a sense of solidarity; taste for style and attention to functionality. It is also worth noting that due to the origins and education of these masters, they made example their most effective educational tool, much more so than explicit rules. Indeed, it should not be overlooked that, unlike the rule, example is implicitly subject to personal interpretation and consequently instills in individuals disparate results strongly affected by character and, above all, personal limits. Most of them clearly demonstrated the individualism that is so deeply rooted in Latin cultures and which has ever since been a blessing and a curse of Mediterranean societies. Sometimes, even this circumstance helped in making the human environment of the clubs fertile ground, facilitating a confrontation between fantasies and even the most subjective beliefs. At best, what is emphasized is a nonconformist attitude not doomed to eccentricity but resulting from the need to express oneself with no half measures. From a strictly sport or, better, agonist perspective, the strong sense of personal identity may lead the weakest characters to vanity and a desire to be in the limelight, whereas a strong sense of personal identity requires the most structured ones to cope with the results of competitions in a more rigorous way. In this respect, the

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famed statement by Pierre Frédy, Baron de Coubertin, “L’important dans la vie ce n’est point le triomphe, mais le combat, l’essentiel ce n’est pas d’avoir vaincu mais de s’être bien battu,” is constantly contradicted in the old tradition clubs. Never underestimating the importance of “de s’être bien battu” nor living with arrogance and temporary superiority, the result of competition has always been of a sacred value for all of us: taking into account the importance of victory means necessarily acknowledging the superiority of the opponent and considering as relevant, the self-assessment.

Our beliefs are surely not exclusive to sea sports or to the Neapolitan yacht clubs. Nevertheless, it should also be taken into account...
that there are few other sports in which skewing the results is as easy or in which cheating by others and external factors such as meteorology or the inadequacy of technical equipment can be used to justify a defeat. This is the reason why—alongside the aforementioned inclination to serve as a reference system of values—the ethics of sport are, in these environments, highly stressed and constantly tested. The outcomes of this ordeal, good or bad as they are, become the most typical feature of the education of sea-sport athletes.

The coexistence in the same club of both sailing and rowing activities, even if not exclusively limited to Neapolitan yacht clubs, is not common outside our region and thus represents a further distinguishing feature (Figures 2 and 3). The competition between the athletes of the two sports, which typically begins during adolescence, engenders within the club a strong antagonism, which is then experienced under the guidance of masters always in a spirit of solidarity. The sailors—witty and wise people, brisk, wind sniffers, sometimes talented—consider rowers as rough, mere brutes without a brain, all physical strength and nothing more. Rowers, guardians of a past ideal of purity and strength, who lavish themselves on a single race that is worth the entire season, a few but long-lasting minutes of war without weapons, consider sailors not to be sportsmen as they are, not true men. However, these views dissolve over the years spent side by side, thus giving birth to a genuine bond. Each time a sailboat or a rowing crew of the club wins, it is the club as a whole that wins. Just as in the event of a sea storm, all those who know and can rush to do their part. This spirit, shared by sailors and rowers, notables and seamen, has been the guardian of the soul of a true fellowship during the century of its origins, the last century, this century, and will perhaps be so in the centuries to come—the spirit of those who love the sea, friends, and sport (Figure 4).

In conclusion, the description given of the oldest Neapolitan yacht clubs is an attempt to explain how much the agonistic activity can influence the training of sea athletes. In particular, we have tried to show how, in growing up from adolescence to sport maturity in this community of athletes, a very functional mestization to Darwinian processes is achieved: selection of the members of the club, formation of the sport management for the following years, and, much more importantly, preparation of the athletes for integration into the extraordinarily complex and contradictory societies of the southern regions of the Old Continent.

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