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ABSTRACT

The main focus in this article is to analyse representations of body and class in strength sport and boxing in a Swedish context during the period 1910–1960, as well as their deeper societal meanings. The concepts of profession, body and class are understood in close connection to the theoretical concepts of value and capital. This study’s understanding of class and group affiliation differs from more traditional class analyses. It is argued for an in-depth understanding of how such processes take place and work through a broader concept of class. Representations are examined through magazines closely connected to the sports, as well as identification through autobiographies, written by prominent athletes during the early and mid twentieth century. The study shows a close link between these sports and manual labour. Physically strenuous work functioned both as a training regime in itself but was also presented as a way to be ‘discovered’. However, the close connection to the working class and manual labour groups meant that physical strength came to be seen as something natural. Sporting success was also locked into body capital, which also had a relatively low exchange value in relation to other forms of capital.

Boxing and strength sport are fruitful study objects in order to understand how class aspects have come to be related to various body perceptions and physical characteristics and ideals. In this paper, it will be argued that the physicality of boxers and strength athletes came to be seen by many as a natural class outcome. The analysis is grounded in the theoretically founded assumption that social structures and power aspects affect how different individuals’ bodies are perceived, which leads to different sets of values being applied to bodies. The concept of value is used as a theoretical concept, which is connected to several different parameters: class, capital, body and profession, thereby shedding new light on factors that have rarely been investigated before in the world of sports.

The aim of the paper is to examine how these values affected representations of body and class in strength sports and boxing in a Swedish context during the period.
1910–1960. In relation to this, a relatively little-studied class aspect in sports will be discussed, namely the link between manual labour itself and sports environments predominantly populated by working class men. In this sense, the paper contributes not only to an increased empirical understanding of the concept of value and its impact on body perceptions, but also to an increased understanding of how class and corporeality can be understood and analysed in the world of sports. In this sense boxing and strength sports can deepen the knowledge of how the bodies of subordinate groups are seen and perceived in as well as outside the world of sports.

The fact that the practitioners of these sports came predominantly from groups performing manual labour had consequences for how the sports as well as the athletes were perceived and therefore are chosen as a starting point for the study. Strength sports and boxing in the early and mid twentieth century also had a close connection to professionalism which in many ways violated the amateur norms of the sports movement and thus took place in a grey zone that spanned three different fields: entertainment, amateur sports and professional sports. This also had clear class implications: if there were opportunities to make money from engagement in sports, people from lower classes would often be willing to take advantage of such opportunities. In the remainder of this paper, it will be further shown how professional activity and class background were often linked to the examined sports and how physically demanding work was linked to training, fitness, and body capital.

Sport has in modern times come to play an important role in how society as a whole regards the human body and its physical configuration. This can partly be explained by the body being at the centre of sport and that body practices constitute its central core. Today, there is an important theoretical and empirical discussion regarding how bodies can be understood in terms of both gender and power parameters. Research in sports history has been strongly influenced by this discussion. Based on this, several important and well-conducted studies have examined corporeality and body perceptions in the world of sports as well as sports impact on the world outside the field of sport.

Previous research has also identified significant differences between classes in terms of the relationship to the body and physicality. This also includes sports and the relationship to the perception of bodies in the sporting context, as well as its historical backgrounds and explanations. The research has revealed that different classes choose sports according to different class patterns and that groups performing physical labour have been overrepresented in strength and contact sports. Research has also pointed out that the middle class in the Western world came to consolidate itself as a class vis-à-vis both the old aristocracy and the working class around the middle of the nineteenth century, and sport can be seen as part of this process. The social composition of sports has thus been studied in relative detail, but not how this is connected with perceptions of corporeality, profession, capital and class. In historical research, studies of body perceptions in the world of sports have mainly been dominated by research on different types of bourgeois masculinity ideals. Through previous research, these ideals have many times come to be regarded as completely dominant during the modern era in the Western world.

This paper claims that we should not take the bourgeois view of the body for granted but that different classes have different views on how the body should look,
behave and perform. Strength sports and boxing, which were mainly populated by lower social classes, can therefore complement the picture of how body and class interact regarding different body perceptions. They are therefore used to shed light on representations of bodies within a less frequently studied group, namely that which mainly populated and practiced these sports. The purpose of this paper will be to remedy this and highlight how body, class and labour are seen as structures that influence perceptions of the same in the examined sports.

During the investigated time period – 1910–1960 – Swedish society underwent a series of radical changes. There was the expansion of the Swedish welfare state, to a large extent formed by the governing Social Democrats, representing the lower classes. There was also major lifestyle and cultural changes, such as an increased standard of living and the further rise of mass consumption, as well as a transformation of the workplaces with the expansion of rationalised and mechanised forms of production. In the long run, these changes also affected body images and how bodies were perceived in sports as well as society as a whole.

**Theoretical and Historical Context**

As stated above, the concept of *value* is used as a way to gain a deeper understanding of class relations and class aspects in sports. The purpose is to explore the ways that the ideal body was represented in the source material and in what ways the bodies of the athletes were connected to different values and characteristics, such as profession, physical training and strength. For the analysis of how class was related to the body and corporeality, Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus and especially the concepts of *capital* and *hexis* (put simply, the ways of using one's body) is used. These concepts help to understand the ways that different bodies have been loaded with different meanings in relation to different social contexts. How bodies are interpreted and perceived is a central part of our relationships with other people. Physical or bodily capital is something people can both acquire and be socialised into, since social position and background is of great importance for the development of an individual's body. Some social groups and communities have more power than others to determine in what ways the body should appear and behave; and those ideals also vary over time. Since these forms of capital are embodied, value is also attached to one's own body and one's own person.

The athletes who came from a background of manual labour, unlike their bourgeois counterparts, came to place great value on physical strength, large muscles and body size as such. The working class sought out to a particularly high degree the more force- and strength-emphasising sports, where either physical close contact or struggle, man against man, dominated. The fact that different classes have embraced different sports can also be linked to physical work, as previous researchers have also pointed out. Competing in work performance, such as lifting heavy burdens, has a long tradition among the part of the population performing manual work. In this sense the class ideals that occurred in the sources often exceeded the limits between the working class (in the socio-economic aspect) and other strata. The ideal group discern what could be called *manual labour groups*, where the emphasis was put on physical strength and ability to work hard, no matter if the
persons were wage workers that formed the majority or small business owners, small farmers and sometimes even police officers and firefighters. Therefore the concept of manual labour groups in the plural is applied consciously.

This distinction is made to point to the fact that the bodies of the manual labourers and their physical strength had a value, an exchange value in the form of capital. Added to this, the ways that value has been attached to various aspects of the body is examined. Several other researchers have used Bourdieu’s theoretical apparatus in studies of bodies and physicality. Sociologist Chris Shilling, for example, emphasises that it is easy to imagine the body as a form of capital. According to Shilling, the production of bodily capital refers to the social formation of individuals’ bodies through sports, leisure activities, paid and unpaid work, and all other body-affecting activities that in a way express a social position, a position that is also noticeable in the form of different cultural and economic opportunities.

It could be argued that this competition at work, in similarity with the strength connections to the work task, can be a partial explanation for the interest in practicing and watching certain sports, not least strength sports. At the same time, almost all sports – like professional activities – took place during this research period in homosocial male environments. This homosocial culture was something that in sports could transcend class divisions, at the same time as different classes were generally interested in different sports or had different positions in the sports movement. Sport has played a crucial role in the emergence of modern masculinity. Researchers have drawn attention to the sports movement as part of an emerging bourgeois masculine culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which was based on a notion of a methodical and rational approach, so also to the body. In upper- and middle-class sports, the classic gentleman’s ideals, such as honesty, self-control, and courtesy mixed with strength and ability, were emphasised. The competition as such was less important, instead significance was placed on recreation and health. In sports, both in terms of organisation and practice, there is thus an inherent class dimension that should be highlighted. This dimension, which was also present in the strength sports and boxing, will be discussed later in the paper. To clarify the argument, masculinity will theoretically be considered a capital form in this article, a capital form that could also be exchanged for other forms of capital and in that way creating the athletes’ hexis.

The bourgeois sports ideology can be summed up with the concept of amateurism. Researchers such as John Hargreaves have described the amateur ideal as a form of middle-class sporting hegemony. But what consequences did this have for the sports practitioners in boxing and strength sports, especially in a Swedish context? And what consequences did this have for how their bodies came to be perceived? To discuss this in more detail the close connection between sports and labour is explored. On the basis of the professional and commercial phenomena of sports, sports as a means of subsistence and its link to manual labour will be examined. Thereby, the fruitfulness of looking at class in sports based on a use of the theoretical concept of value will be shown. This paper will argue that the connection between the examined sports and manual labour became important for how the sports were portrayed, how the athletes’ bodies were described as well as what status and what value came to be associated with the sports and the athletes, as will be
discussed in the following. To make this connection clear, the four sports stars Arvid Andersson, Carl Svensson, Harry Persson and Ingemar Johansson will be used in this study as case examples.

Methodological Considerations

Two categories of sources are used for the empirical investigation. Firstly, autobiographies by the four abovementioned athletes have been studied. Carl ‘Calle Sven’ Svensson (1879–1956) and Arvid ‘Starke Arvid’ Andersson (1873–1954) were both strongmen, wrestlers and weightlifters active during the early twentieth century. The remaining two were internationally successful heavyweight boxers; Harry Persson (1898–1979), European champion in the 1920s, and Ingemar Johansson (1932–2009), world champion in 1959. These athletes were selected because they were prominent during their active years, but more so because they, unlike other Swedish athletes at this time, came to write autobiographies in which views on their own class background, body and working life were described. The athletes as such will be used as illustrations of how bodies, manual labour and class background came to affect how the sports and athletes were depicted and they will be presented in more detail later in the empirical part of the text. Secondly, magazines with close ties to boxing and strength sports, which mainly targeted men particularly from the working class, were used to deepen the overall picture.

In the magazines representations are encountered, while the autobiographies – at least to a certain extent – can reveal how the authors individually wanted to be perceived. Thus, bodily hierarchies are considered both in the sphere of sports but also in the popular culture through the mass media, since an exchange took place between these spheres. Although the empirical examples are Swedish, the study object and the sources must be understood in an international context. The influence from North American popular culture was evident, particularly in the boxing area. International boxing matches and heroes were widely represented in the Swedish environment and can be understood in the context of what in the science of history today is known as entangled history.

How the athletes’ previous manual and physically demanding work was seen as strength-developing will be described, first on the basis of the strongmen Andersson and Svensson, followed by examples taken mainly from Persson’s and Johansson’s life and living. Finally, the empirical results and their implications for the overall theoretical understanding of the links between bodies, profession, physical capital and value is concluded.

Strength Sports, Body and Manual Labour Through the Examples of Andersson and Svensson

Strength sports have in international research been highlighted as originating from a working-class environment. Although the studies are few, the class aspect of weightlifting in the United States has nevertheless been touched upon by, for example, the historian John D. Fair. According to Fair, the weightlifters in the United
States usually came from the working class and many were also second-generation immigrants. Based on their economic situation, amateurism was not as high an ideal as that of other groups. This origin in a working-class setting, did however not prevent bourgeois men from practicing strength training as a way of building the body and thus shaping the character, in more 'adequate' contexts and places. Between the worker-dominated and bourgeoisie-dominated strength training there were clear differences. The latter came to emphasise the character and properly formed muscles; here the strongman Eugene Sandow's symmetric body came to be considered an ideal, while the worker-dominated sports of wrestling and weightlifting came to emphasise strength and performance.

Another clear distinction was the acceptance of professionalism, which connected the strength sports to the entertainment-industry and this aspect of the sport was viable well into the twentieth century. Prominent athletes such as Carl Svensson and Arvid Andersson were involved in both professional sports entertainment and association-led weightlifting, where the two later became instructors. Svensson had also participated in the Olympic Games in Athens in 1906, which underlines the somewhat fluid boundaries between professionalism and amateurism.

In the following, another way of connecting strength sports with professionalism and occupation is analysed, namely, the often emphasised connection between physically strenuous manual work in general and the sports examined in particular. The fact that strength sports were linked to manual labour and preferably physically demanding ones, is illustrated by the circumstance that many athletes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were discovered or themselves discovered that they were strong through manual labour and in their workplaces. Andersson and Svensson both described episodes where strongmen were discovered in their workplaces. This marked what came to be labelled as a suitable form of training, and what (male) body type was considered appropriate for the athletes.

Svensson for instance told in his autobiography about how the 'chaps' at Finnboda shipyard, where Arvid Andersson worked before he became a professional athlete, had competed among themselves by lifting all sorts of scrap iron that littered the shipyard floor. Andersson would after a while have been invited to participate, and soon became really good at pushing parts of steam boiler valves and other similar things up in the air. Informal competitions, lifting various heavy objects during work breaks to consolidate one's position of strength, took place long before any written rules were formalised. Instead, the audience had to monitor that everything was done according to the rules.

Carl Svensson himself was born in 1879 in the working-class district of Södermalm in Stockholm. He served from the turn of the century until the 1920s for the most part his livelihood as a strongman. His defiant disposition made it challenging for him to stay in one place for long. As a young boy he found it difficult to accept the 'bosses' unfair treatment, which often led to him defending himself against his attackers with 'hand force.' In 1904, Svensson traveled to the United States. There he was persuaded to compete in a world championship in Madison Square Garden. According to his own statement he succeeded to be second in the competition.

Svensson would have had one of his first encounters with barbells at the age of fourteen behind a sheet metal workshop. He had earlier tried a barbell in a courtyard...
on Södermalm. An elegant gentleman had passed by and offered the one who could push press the bar the most times a Swedish krona in prize money. Svensson emerged victorious from the match and gained interest in weightlifting. Thus, he went to the sheet metal workshop where he heard that there would be more ‘weightlifting stuff’. Behind the workshop stood the sheet metal worker’s son, the sheet metal workers’ companions and some other boys in their 20s who worked out with weights and barbells. They wore their usual work clothes, but Calle Sven thought it looked ‘sharp’ anyway. A sheet metal worker asked if he wanted to try a clean and jerk. Svensson grabbed the bar and it went up on straight arms immediately, the others were impressed and more and more weights were hung on the barbell.23

There was an aspect of class connected to this, as the worker-dominated environments greatly valued pure strength, as opposed to agility and mobility in higher social strata. In Svensson’s case, the opportunity to make money also seems to have served as a decisive detail early in his sports career. The bodily value of strength, as well as the importance of it for earnings, not only left its mark on income, but strength was also a factor in the relationships between these men as well as in the depictions of one’s own body. The physical strength gave status within the group, both an exchange value in the form of masculine capital and bodily capital. The fact that toil was linked to the manual work was crucial for how the strength sports were embraced by the manual labour groups. Although the sport shows a change during the study period from a ‘popular culture’ of strength to a sportification of it.24 Between these two, however, there is no clear demarcation. What is clear, however, is that there was a recurring narrative, which was linked to physically demanding work and the competition in connection with it.

Another example of this was present in the strongman Arvid Andersson’s autobiography. Like Svensson, he grew up in a working class environment but unlike Svensson in a rural one. Andersson was born in 1873 in the countryside in the province of Södermanland and grew up in a crofter’s cottage. Andersson’s schooling was somewhat sporadic. On the other hand, he described how important it was for his own development that he already at a young age had to ‘do the right thing for himself’, which meant helping with fishing, chopping wood, and work in the field during the summer as a way to pay the lease to the landowner they rented the croft from. Andersson, however, considered that even if the work was hard, it was never harmful; on the contrary, it helped to harden and strengthen his body, which was crucial for his future profession as an athlete.25

In his youth, he travelled around and took on odd unskilled jobs. Already during this time, Andersson experienced the importance of accepting a challenge in strength, something that would later come in handy in his future sports career. Several episodes in the autobiography describe how heavy the work was, and hard work appears to be important for him to highlight.26 As a fifteen-year-old farmhand, Andersson described himself as a full-grown man who then showed ‘proof of full manpower’. This meant that he could easily take a barrel of rye on his back and carry it up the stairs to the granary. He was often incited to these tests of strength encouraged by other men in his vicinity.27

There were apparent similarities in how the two strongmen Andersson and Svensson described how they gained their physical strength through various forms
of manual labour. Svensson, just like Andersson, started working at an early age. In his father’s small business, he was subjected to harsh tests of strength. For example, as a fourteen-year-old he carried a cask at the weight of 60 kilograms, on his shoulder through the city on a hot summer day, he explained in his autobiography. It was hard, but according to his own statement, he already had an unwavering will to never give up. The hard work also gave him training for his future work as a strongman. Svensson also depicted how his work as a blacksmith at the age of fifteen, swinging a large sledgehammer twelve hours a day, helped to establish his back strength, a strength that helped him become one of Sweden’s champion athletes.

These examples should be analytically understood in terms of internalisation and societal structures. The athlete is, so to speak, locked into his previous physical labour and his position as a manual labourer – a labour that is seen as superior to a structured training. At the same time in the autobiographies, there was an obvious pride about the hard work and the strength that the manual labour had brought with it. The strength and toughness that both the strongmen themselves, but also the newspaper articles emphasised as an ideal, were set, often in relation to the upper and middle classes. These layers were not considered in possession of strength, they could not physically sort themselves out and thus they were also to some extent morally inferior. In Andersson’s and Svensson’s autobiographies, there were rhetorical passages about different classes’ physical abilities in relation to strength. During a tour in Helsinki Andersson is, for instance, said to have received derogatory remarks about his strength from a noble young gentleman who thought that he himself could easily redo Andersson’s prof of strength, which the noble young man subsequently failed to do.

In their autobiographies Svensson and Andersson unequivocally linked the narratives of manual work as their respective key to success. Strength was also part of the physical value and capital that the strength athlete possessed and could thus be exchanged for other capital forms, but at the same time it was a form of capital that was well connected with class implications. These images, as discussed in the introduction, also relates to body capital because bodies are carriers of habitus or, in the more performative sense, hexis. People organise their bodies through a learning of body techniques and body schemes. These ideals are class-bound and at the same time different social values are made visible through the body.

The physical hexis of the strength athletes included a kind of continued performative making of this class background by stressing the importance of a manual labour. Descriptions of how especially the strength athletes were discovered in their work, and that they themselves came to the conclusion that they were strong because of their work, constituted clear points of reference that were retold in various contexts. The manual labour thus became a form of training and were linked to the myth of the hard manual work as the cornerstone of the strong body. At the same time, such myths did not exist in a social vacuum – they were and are context-bound. Such legends are and were also important in the sport of boxing as will be discussed in the following through the examples of the boxers Harry Persson and Ingemar Johansson.
**Boxing, Class and Profession through the Lens of Persson and Johansson**

The historical background of modern boxing has been debated, but most researchers agree that the sport’s roots can be found in a popular street and betting culture that can be traced back to the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, at the end of the nineteenth century, boxing had begun to be seen as an accepted way for gentlemen to vent their aggressions and learn self-defence. Boxing, or perhaps especially sparring, became an increasingly accepted training alternative for young men from the middle and upper classes. In practice, however, there was a big difference between worker-dominated professional boxing and amateur aristocratic gentleman’s boxing. It was in the latter form that boxing was first presented to a Swedish audience. 

However, soon the sport was predominantly embraced, by the working class in Sweden. As early as in the 1910s, boxing became a political issue in the Swedish Parliament. During the interwar period, the sport was one of the largest in Sweden in terms of audience and largely coincided with professional boxer Harry Persson’s success within it. Professional boxing, however, continued to be a matter of dispute in the following decades, and in 1970 it was finally completely banned throughout Sweden. In practice, the opportunity to engage in professional boxing had already been heavily circumvented in various ways.

In the 1920s, Harry Persson was one of Sweden’s major sports stars. He was Scandinavian champion, and became European champion in professional heavyweight boxing within the European Boxing Union in 1926 when he knocked-out the Englishman Phil Scott in the 11th round. Persson then came to be considered a possible challenger to the world champion title-holder Jack Dempsey, and traveled to the United States to try his luck in the ring.

Persson was born in 1898 in a poor workers family in Stockholm. His father worked as a coachman and when the father passed away, Persson’s mother was left alone to support the family by cleaning and washing and Persson therefore early on had to contribute to the household. In his autobiography Persson paid great attention to this background. Just as for strongmen Andersson and Svensson, boxing was for Persson a way to get a source of income. This was emphasised already in the subtitle of his autobiography *10 years in the ring: How I raised myself from unemployed brick paviour to Scandinavian heavyweight champion* (1933). Persson came to depict himself in just that way: how he rose from a subordinate position to economic and sporting success. By stressing his economic success, that could only come from performing boxing as a profession, Persson underlined a class transformation. Sparring and good defensive boxing have historically been associated with the upper classes, while competition and professional matching mainly have been associated with the lower classes. This difference can also be attributed to the fact that it was boxers from the manual labour groups who mainly came to practice professional boxing and therefore also came to highlight their physical and financial success.

Before Persson became a professional boxer, he worked as a paviour and messenger, among other things. Thus, finding work was hard and his earnings were poor and consequently, according to his own statements, his diet suffered. After a
hand injury and problems with performing the work as a paviour, Persson decided that if he were to continue boxing, it would be because he got paid to do so. Persson underlined that he was tired of making money for others, and to exemplify how dirty amateur boxing could also be, he stated that an ‘amateur boxing tycoon’ had offered him much more money under the table for an amateur match than he got for his first professional fight. It would have been tempting to take on the offer when the tycoon appeared well-dressed and with a well-filled wallet, while Persson himself stood and paved stone with a hefty rammer. The tycoon's money was set as a contrast to Persson's own heavy ramming, which did not at all give the same profit as the banknotes that the tycoon had in his wallet. Body, manual labour and class thus interacted in this narrative to create the sporting and working body, and its value in contrast to other groups, and it can similarly be compared with Andersson and the noble youth portrayed above.

Persson’s poor and hardworking childhood was also emphasised in the press. In the boxing magazine *All boxing* in 1926, in an article where parts were translated from an English original by the journalist Burris Jenkins Jr, it was pointed out that Persson had worked as a brick paviour and built streets with a more than 25 kgs heavy rammer which he had lifted all day long, something that explained where he ‘got his huge arms, legs and muscular back’. Also internationally famous boxers such as Jack Dempsey, Jack McAuliffe, James Jeffries and Bob Fitzsimmons were described in the same manner. The magazine mentioned them as examples of boxers that would have developed their punching ability and muscles ‘by swinging a sledge-hammer’ and ‘through work of a simple nature’. Furthermore, it was explained that ‘one of the main reasons why there are currently so few boxers with force of impact in their punch is that modern machinery has made increasingly hard work with hands unnecessary.’

The rationalisation process of industry and training, that had accelerated after the First World War, thus had an effect in that boxing athletes now lacked the right strength and thus punching power, even though the sport of boxing, especially in the English-speaking world, earlier had gained a more institutionalised and regulated function than other sports. Nevertheless manual labour was seen as hardening, and many times as a more strength-developing exercise, than the gym workout. According to the same article, Persson’s punching power would have rubbed off when he finished his work as a paviour. Consequently, in professional boxing, manual labour was seen as a way to develop a blow’s impact and punching power came to be associated with sluggers from lower social groups.

Even though masculinity was associated with both strength and intelligence, these values had to be reconciled properly. In professional boxing, intelligence was associated with notions of good defensive boxing, and something that could mainly explain the few professional boxers who were considered to come from better backgrounds such as Gene Tunney, Jim Corbett and George Carpentier, and their lack of a real knock-out punch was explained by the same thing. Notions such that strong people were less intelligent, and that different boxing styles were expressions of different levels of education and intelligence, were intimately linked to notions of class.

However, physically hard and demanding work before the sports career took off was not only originally something that built up strength. Even during the career
itself, manual work could be a way to strengthen the body and also build it in to shape. Professional boxers could also ‘choose’ to go back to previous physically strenuous work to re-develop their punch and strength. For example, at the end of the 1920s, a Swedish boxing correspondent in New York wrote that boxer Tommy Loughran, in a ‘known manner’, began working in the blacksmith profession ‘to get steel in his muscles’. In these practices, the link between physical work and sports and training was emphasised. Photographs of working sports stars such as Ace Hudkins further underlined this. Hudkins was pictured digging with a shovel in his backyard to train his forearms and wrists before his match against Phil McGraw.

The body schemes conveyed in the images of the source material imply that the boxer was socialised with a certain habitus that manifests itself through a corresponding hexis, that is, internalised bodily expressions. This was emphasised in the articles as well as in the cartoons, where for example Harry Persson was represented working as a paviour with rolled up sleeves and big sized tattooed arms. The illustrations thereby refer to the boxer as working class, according to a system, where the shape and size of the body also were linked to manual labour. This also laid the foundation for an ideal and was also about different expectations of how the manual worker’s body should behave and look, and above all the worker was emphasised as more bodily than other classes. In the image material, the working and boxing body was undressed and idealised for muscles, physicality and work.

In the long run, this meant that the professional athlete’s body was mainly linked to physical work and manual labour and not to rational training. This view was prominent in the boxing magazines of the 1920s, where, for example, mining and lumbering were seen as developing strength, but also in how manual work was described as training during the 1940s and 1950s. However, this theme declined sharply during this period. The training had then been rationalised and made more scientific. As such, the relationship to manual work and toil was no longer as evident in professional boxing. In the United States, Taylorism and rationalisation in the industrial sector had also been implemented earlier than in Sweden. At the same time, after all, physical strength continued to be an important prerequisite in certain jobs, such as building and construction work, even after new electric machines were introduced into the work process. The view thus began to decline, but did not disappear completely and appeared particularly in the magazines’ cartoons and illustrations. Even then, manual labour was often highlighted in the press as a rhetorical effect to configure a boxer and a strength athlete’s background and explain where he had got such solid strength from.

This change was, for instance, present in the autobiography of world champion Ingemar Johansson, who took the heavyweight title from Floyd Patterson in 1959, but then lost it and failed to regain it in two return matches in 1960 and 1961. When Johansson, like the other athletes, described his sport as a profession, he did not emphasise that his background, or the fact that he had worked different physically demanding jobs, would have made him into an able boxer. The Gothenburg-born Johansson additionally came from a working class family, his father was as a bricklayer, and like Persson, Johansson had worked as a paviour before becoming a professional.
Nevertheless for a boxer like Johansson the sport in its more pure form still appeared as a source of income, as it had for Johansson’s predecessor Harry Persson. A driving force behind Johansson’s professional career was money, not just the honour or the match win itself, as he explained in his autobiography. In Loïc Wacquant’s study of the boxing culture in a more recent Chicago gym, he points out that boxers often regard their own performance as work and their bodies as work tools. Wacquant’s conclusions point to a historical continuity. Kath Woodward has shown a similar historical continuity regarding boxing as a profession in an interview study. The sport of boxing is largely seen as a way of earning a living, gaining trust and feeling useful for oneself, when the physical assets, or the physical capital if one so wishes, come into use.

Although the emphasis on physically demanding work and manual labour as important for the sports career and physical development decreased at the end of the study period, the connection to working life was a structuring theme in the source material. The common tendency to describe how athletes were discovered thanks to their manual work is highlighted by examples taken from especially Persson’s, Andersson’s and Svensson’s autobiographies, as well as how other groups’ bodies and physical (in)abilities were used to highlight the athlete’s own moral and physical superiority.

Concluding Remarks

In sports bodily values and body capital can and could be expressed and articulated. But what did this mean for the perception of the boxer and strongman’s body? These bodies were given certain values based on notions of background and professional affiliation and at the same time the athletes themselves reflected on these issues. Several of the examples discussing this in the magazines were taken from the international boxing scene and especially from American boxing magazines and translated into Swedish. This shows an ideal of international bearing.

This concluding discussion is based on the concepts of class, labour, body and capital, in order to exemplify and deepen the argument regarding the view of the bodies of the strength athletes Andersson and Svensson and the boxers Persson and Johansson. The athletes portrayed themselves as solid and real men, in contrast to the upper classes and academics, and they used their bodies and strength as evidence of this superiority, as was evident in Anderson’s, Svensson’s and Persson’s autobiographies. It was strength and power that was put to the fore, being the source also of a superior and natural moral asset. This also included strong individualistic ideals, where successes thanks to the strength and efforts of the body were hailed. Therefore it could be argued for a broader understanding of how class is created and how this also permeates sport and affects how we look at and understand the sporting body.

Manual labour and professional life appear in the source material as central arranging themes. Most often, these themes have also proved to be permeated by various notions concerning group affiliation, class and occupation. Boxers and strength athletes often viewed these sports not only as a form of recreation, but also as an opportunity to make money (even if only a few succeeded). This meant
that these sports, to a certain extent, came to be regarded and described as a profession. Physically demanding work was repeatedly portrayed as the almost self-evident reason why the athletes had become so virtuous at their sports. This was apparent in the numerous descriptions of athletes who were discovered through their physically demanding work, or themselves, as Andersson, Svensson and Persson, came to terms with their aptitude in their manual labour practices. Manual work could also be described as a valuable form of exercise and a method for shaping up – especially portraying the work in the forest, the smithy, the mine and on the construction site in this manner. This was a theme present in both the autobiographies and the magazine material. Strength sports and boxing, as well as the manual labour profession could, during the early twentieth century, be regarded as a homosocial field, where the physical strength and the culture of challenge were part of a kind and form of masculine capital.

At the same time, the background as manual labourer was something that was expected of the athletes. Together with the almost stereotypical depiction of physical and manual work as a form of exercise this was an orderly theme in the magazines and autobiographies. This included connotations concerning what was expected of different groups and classes and included notions of how the right body would be shaped, fashioned and perceived but also how different groups perceived their own bodies. The autobiographical material is a clear indication of this, with the reservation that these too were expected to follow a certain genre and meet readers’ expectations. To relate to Bourdieu’s concept of hexis, the texts offered and formed different ways of relating both to one’s own body and to the bodies of others. The source material reflects various representations that are important for the individual’s hexis and, by extension, the perception of identity. These conceptions of body and class can be both rejected and accepted by a subject, but what emerges here is a dominant representation that highlighted physically demanding work as crucial for the sports career. During the 1940s and 1950s, however, this begins to change and Johansson, for instance, did not highlight his physical work as important for his sports career, even though it was to some extent the case with how the boxing magazines depicted him.

Hence, this paper highlights a previously not very noticed tendency to connect different groups with sports based on previous profession, in this case a manual labour. It also shows that a special form of former occupational livelihood was important in professional sports, not just that the sports as such were professions. At the same time, this connection also made the training into something natural and something the boxer and strength athletes developed through their profession and not so much through a rational training programme. Therefore this paper argue that the physicality of professional boxers and strength athletes came to be seen by many, as well as the athletes themselves, as a natural class outcome.

The main exchange value of the manual labouring men was their own bodies. According to Bourdieu, the body types of the working class and manual labourers constitute physical capital with a lower exchange value than that formed by the dominant classes. These groups had a lower opportunity to transform physical capital into social and cultural equivalents, as their bodily value was already underestimated. Based on the power dimensions that existed around how value was and is
attributed to different bodies, arguably it could be emphasised that the representation of the bodies as ‘naturally’ strong and tenacious should ultimately be sought in a social order where manual labour groups were generally far down the social hierarchy.

Nevertheless, strength sports and boxing meant an opportunity, albeit a limited one, to transform physical capital into a greater economic and cultural one than what other physical work could entail. The sports could thus appear as a way for poor men to use their physical qualities to make wealth. Although this also implies that the manual worker’s value was even in sporting success still tied to the body. Their physical capital could be valuable as labour (which, however, diminished towards the end of the period of investigation), it could give status within the group, and thanks to sports there was a possibility that it could lead to fame and riches. At the same time, the connection of value to the body made it almost by necessity fleeting and temporary, due to aging and injuries. Although physical capital through sporting success could be converted into economic capital, it was much more difficult to transform it into social capital and even less to cultural capital. The possible benefits of economic capital were also fragile: the source material often depicted how athletes lost most of their assets when physical decline became a fact, or because of individual shortcomings. In the cases concerning the four athletes, they all tried to invest in small businesses during and after their careers. Nevertheless, Andersson, Persson and Svensson, all had to wind up their respective operations after a while and for periods both Persson and Svensson came to work as doormen. This underlines the fact that an athlete from manual labour groups was thus ultimately bound to his corporeality and original social position.

Notes


4. For more general studies on this, see Andrew Carl Holman, A Sense of Their Duty: Middle-Class Formation in Victorian Ontario Towns (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).


10. See, for example, Janzon, Manschettyrken, idrott och hälsa, who uses the closely related concept of manual labour classes when he discusses competition activities and the social composition of weightlifting sports around the turn of the twentieth century. For a discussion of how the commotion between petty bourgeoisie and working class was often fluid, not least during the 1920s and 1930s, see Mats Franzén, Den folkliga staden: Söderkvarter i Stockholm mellan krigen (Lund: Arkiv, 1992). Although these were to a large extent the focus of class-related ideas, for the sake of clarity they must be conceptually distinguished from the working class in the socio-economic (e.g. the traditional Marxist) sense.

11. Bourdieu, Logic of Practice, 74; Bourdieu, Distinction, 190, 207–8; Throop and Murphy, 'Bourdieu and Phenomenology', 188; Turner, Body and Society, 12.

Woodward, ‘Embodied Identities: Boxing Masculinities’, in Rethinking Gender and Youth Sport, ed. Ian Wellard (Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 23–4, which emphasises that the reason why someone starts boxing must often be sought in external factors.


18. Andersson, Starke Arvids minnen, 39–40 and 48–50; Svensson, Minnen från ring och arena, 38–9, 49–50 and 92; Atletik, no. 2 (1939): 7; Atletik, no. 7 (1935): 5.

19. Andersson, Starke Arvids minnen, 29; Svensson, Minnen från ring och arena, 68. See also Atletik, no. 3 (1939): 10–1; Rekord-Magasinet, no. 2 (1947): 8.

20. Svensson, Minnen från ring och arena, 78. See also Atletik, no. 4 1938, 3; Atletik, no. 4 (1938): 9.

21. Hellspong, Den folkliga idronen, 30 and 60.


26. Andersson, Starke Arvids minnen, 22; Rekord-Magasinet, no. 6 1947, 9.

27. Andersson, Starke Arvids minnen, 9; cf. Hellspong, Den folkliga idronen.


29. Svensson, Minnen från ring och arena, 30.

30. Andersson, Starke Arvids minnen, 52–55, 66–67 and 98–99; Atletik, no. 6 (1939), 8. See also Svensson, Minnen från ring och arena, 57–58 and 80–84.


33. Hellspong, Boxningssporten i Sverige; John Peter Sugden, Boxing and Society: An International Analysis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 92. Kath Woodward emphasises that the boxing elite historically but also today in most cases come from the working class, Kath Woodward, Boxing, Masculinity and Identity: The 'I' of the Tiger (New York: Routledge, 2007), 108; Wacquant, Body and Soul, cites two sociological examples of how class and ethnicity interact in determining the boxer's social position in the late 20th century. See also Gorn, Manly Art and Sammons, Beyond the Ring, for historical discussion on the topic. Sociologist Alan M. Klein writes about a similar relationship where weightlifting, gym culture and bodybuilding until the 1980s mainly attracted the working class, Alan M. Klein, Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 186–7. Loïc Wacquant has observed that boxing is a working-class profession, not least in the physical nature of the activity, but also in the social recruitment to the sport. Loïc J.D. Wacquant, ‘The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers think about their Trade', Theory and Society 24, no. 4 (1995): 502. Gerald Early also emphasises the intersection between race and class with regard to boxing as a professional practice in the USA: Early, Culture of Bruising. See also Sammons, Beyond the Ring, 92.

34. Hellspong, Boxningssporten i Sverige, 19.
35. Harry Persson, 10 år i ringen (Stockholm: Fylgia, 1933), 9–30.
36. Gorn, Manly Art, 47–48. See also De Garis, 'Be a Buddy to Your Buddy', 96, who discusses defensive backing and sparring training as an alternative masculine ideal in boxing, built on historical class differences.
37. Persson, 10 år i ringen, 20–30.
38. See also Persson, 10 år i ringen, 57–69, for an example of how Persson made fun of his former manager Hjalmar Palmqvist's stinginess and chubbiness.
40. All boxing, no. 8 (1923): 7.
41. Gorn, Manly Art; Boddy, Boxing.
42. All boxing, no. 8 (1923): 7.
43. Stearns, Be A Man, 17–18 and 30–35; Sammons, Beyond the Ring, 78; Boddy, Boxing, 216–217.
44. All boxing, no. 70 (1929): 3. See also how Floyd Johnson is proposed to take up the smithy profession to learn how to put weight in the blow. The blacksmithing profession was described as a profession that developed muscles and strength successfully: All boxing, no. 8 1923, 7, or the Swedish boxer John Erickson who left the ring to 'regain strength and health' through forestry work, All boxing, no. 35 (1929): 1 and 3.
45. All boxing, no. 44 (1926): 5.
46. Rekord-Magasinet, no. 5 (1943), back cover. See also Rekord-Magasinet, no. 2 (1945), back cover.
51. E.g. Johansson, *Sekonderna lämnar ringen*, 80; Harry Persson, *10 år i ringen*, 20–30 and, 54. Both boxing magazines and interviewed professional boxers such as Rocky Marciano came to describe boxing as a profession and one of the hardest ones. In addition: *Rekord-Magasinet*, no. 46 (1953), 11; see also *Svensk boxning*, no. 1 (1921), 4; *All boxning*, no. 8 1923, 3; *Rekord*, no. 23 (1959), 10.
57. Despite this notion of ‘easy money’ was and in many cases still is a tenacious myth in the sport of boxing, Sugden, *Boxing and Society*, 51–6. Johansson, however, proved to be somewhat more fortunate with his excavator and site preparation company.

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