8th INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS FOR THE HISTORY OF SPORT AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

At the request of International Association for the History of Physical Education and Sport (HISPA) arranged by Swedish Society for the History of Sport (SVIF)

CONGRESS REPORT

Uppsala and Stockholm 1979
LINGIANISM AND THE NATURAL METHOD – THE PROBLEM OF CONTINUITY IN SWEDISH GYMNASTICS 1864-1891

JAN LINDBLOM, Stockholm

1. Introduction

Swedish, or Ling, gymnastics has exerted a remarkably strong influence on gymnastic developments abroad. In light of its far-reaching international effects on institutions, organizations and individuals it would be tempting to suppose that Ling gymnastics was unanimously supported and practiced by professional men within its country of origin. Such was not the case. Although everyone in Sweden professed themselves adherents of Ling gymnastics, or at least they did not openly deny its supremacy, its exact contents could be theoretically and practically interpreted in different ways. Two such lines of interpretation are dealt with in this paper. More specifically we are interested in the formation of two groups which became ideological rivals for the position of the "true followers" of Ling's ideas: the Lingianists and the adherents of the natural method. Consideration of these rivalries not only emphasizes conflicts in the interpretation of Ling's original approach but also illuminates the problem of continuity within the development of gymnastics in Sweden.

Scholarly literature on the development of Swedish gymnastics has tended to neglect the fierce rivalry among the followers of Per Henrik Ling. One reason for this is that most attention has been given to the first decades of the 19th century (Ling's lifetime up to 1839), another that history writing on the subject in Sweden -- prevalently penned by gymnastic teachers and others not trained in the historical science -- displays a nationalistic tendency. From the nationalistic point of view it was not as attractive to emphasize an internal schism as to present a picture of the unanimously accepted merits of Swedish gymnastics. In fact a considerable number of Swedish works are more or less compromised by their apologetic approach.

Johannes Lindhard and Signe Prytz, both from Denmark, belong to the most serious critics of Ling gymnastics. They and others have questioned both the independence of Ling's approach vis à vis contemporary colleagues from abroad, such as Guths Muths, Pestalozzi, Nachtgeall, and the scientific basis of Swedish gymnastics. 1) This in turn has accentuated the nationalistic and subjective character of history writing to the detriment of scientifically fruitful studies. One of the best examples of this is provided by a group of Swedish
gymnastic historians -- Gustaf Moberg, Carl August Westerblad, Albert Wiberg and others -- who in the 1940s were stung into organizing a systematic defense of Ling by publishing articles and books in favour of the traditional Ling gymnastics. For instance Westerblad, who had not published for many years, resumed his writing on gymnastics specifically because "den negativa kritiken hotar att förskingra vårt lingska arv" (the negative criticism threatens to disperse our inheritance from Ling).2)

In addition to its scientific shortcomings the literature on Swedish gymnastics is quite meagre. Only Westerblad, originally a philologist (Romance Philology) and later senior master ("lector") at a secondary school, has devoted himself to a penetrating and systematic survey of the scattered source materials. He has published many books and articles concerning the literary and gymnastic contributions of P.H. Ling.3) Yet in spite of his works, as well as contributions by Wiberg, Moberg, Sten Drakenberg, Oswald Holmberg and others,4) the history of Ling gymnastics in Sweden is surprisingly little known and virtually unexplored. At the universities and high schools this field of research is almost totally neglected. No similarly important cultural manifestation emanating from this country has attracted so little attention among the academic circles.

By way of introduction to the historical development of Ling gymnastics in Sweden it seems worthwhile to begin with a few words on the difficulties encountered in interpreting the ideas of P.H. Ling. In this regard an important transition period between Ling with later developments is provided by the activities of his immediate successor as the director at Gymnastiska centralinstitutet (Central Institute for Gymnastics, hereafter GCI), the leading gymnastics institution in Sweden, and the effects of the new statutes issued for the GCI in 1864.5) Subsequent discussion will focus upon the two major trends within Swedish gymnastics -- Lingianism and the natural method -- whose rivalry culminated in the debate over the comprehensive International Gymnastics Demonstration (Festival) held at Stockholm in 1891.

2. Factors contributing to discontinuity in developments after P.H. Ling

Unfortunately Ling himself did not express his thoughts on physical education in a lucid and concise manner. On the contrary he expressed himself vaguely and in various directions. His most important publication, Gymnastikens allmänna grunder,6) is somewhat obscure due to the presence of considerable ingredients from natural philosophy. For the rest his gymnastic writings consist of short articles, regulations describing different types of physical exercises and fragmentary writings.7) These do not comprise more than about 15% of his collected work which prevailingly consist of dramatic poems proclaiming for his contemporaries the old Scandinavian virtues and ambitions.8) Although Ling seems to have devoted himself primarily to pedagogic gymnastics,
he also took a great interest in the other three sectors of gymnastics, namely military, medical and aesthetic gymnastics. Thus neither the ideology nor the intentions of P.H. Ling can be reconstructed with confidence. They all-too-easily invited conflicting interpretations and lines of development.

Lars Gabriel Branting, designated successor of Ling as the director of GCI, strongly accentuated medical gymnastics. In fact medical treatment of numbers of patients consumed most of Branting's time. This one-sided activity during his long directorship (1839-1862) resulted in less effort being devoted to the other sectors of Ling's gymnastics. Although the GCI's interest was broadened after this period, there remained considerable doubts as to the precise nature of Ling's original ideas and intentions. Thus it is reasonable to see this lack of certainty as the key problem in the continuity of gymnastic development in Sweden during the 19th century.

During the 1860s military defense was much discussed and several measures were taken to strengthen it. The marksmanship movement, starting in 1860, formed one exponent of this ambition, the interest in using physical exercises for military purposes was another. Clearly the combination of military defense and physical exercises strengthened the military element in Ling gymnastics. This in turn made it more natural to leave behind the one-sided concentration on medical gymnastics. But such a new course easily caused ideological tensions.

As intimated above, the GCI was reorganized in 1864, when a new set of statutes were issued. This reorganization meant a division of activity into three small departments -- pedagogic, military and medical gymnastics -- each directed by a head-teacher.9) Through the new organization demarcations between the main sectors of Ling gymnastics became even more clear-cut. Although the new system could contribute to a better balance of interests and resources, it also tended to encourage rivalry between the respective departments.

Voluntary gymnastics, organized by local clubs, began to develop during the 1870s, the following decade witnessing the emergence of modern sports. The question then arose to what extent these new activities which were more or less adopted from abroad would harmonize with the traditional Swedish gymnastics.

3. The Lingianism

Hjalmar Ling, the son of P.H. Ling, is recognized as the systemizer of Swedish pedagogic gymnastics. He paved the way for the school gymnastics system which flourished up to the middle of the present century. In doing this he considered himself a true follower of his father's ideas and intentions. As a teacher at the GCI during the period of Branting, Hj. Ling was strongly influenced by the medical aspects of gymnastics. Unlike many of his fellow teachers he was not a military officer, which meant
that military aspects did not counter-balance the medical ones.

Moreover Hj. Ling was a pronounced theorist, publishing many learned writings on physical exercises. It is his system and the principles behind it which are meant by the use of the term "Lingianism". While it tended to predominate within Swedish pedagogic gymnastics, it was not the only line of development. Hence it is important to note here that Lingianism and Ling gymnastics are not identical.

In 1866 Hj. Ling published two important books. One of them was titled "De första begreppen av rörelseläran" and comprised about 400 pages. In it he exhibits his book-learning by referring to an impressive number of Swedish and foreign authors. At the same time the book, filled with numerous detailed facts, demonstrates a significant incapacity to provide a clear and surveyable presentation. For us the greatest interest lies in its confirmation of Hj. Ling's physiological inclinations. The other book published in 1866 was "Tabeller för Gymn. Centralinstitutets läрокurs" (supplemented in 1869 by a so-called "Tillägg"). It contains numerous tables in which exercises and movements are systematically presented. These "Tabeller" (tables), published in many later editions up to the 1920s, became the basic guide to the practical performance of school gymnastics in Sweden for many decades. They very clearly illustrate Hj. Ling's ambition to regulate in detail gymnastic lessons beforehand by using various "dägövningar" (daily programs), harmoniously composed of numerous movements designed to exercise all parts and muscles of the body. Movements were grouped together into so-called "rörelsevarv" (rounds of movements) and "rörelsesläkten" (families of movements). Every movement was carefully described.

Significantly Hj. Ling characterized Swedish gymnastics as "arbetsam vetenskaplig undersökning" (industrious scientific examination). The following ideas, partly overlapping one another, represent the basic Lingianist thinking, i.e. the system of Hj. Ling:

- The specific effect of every movement must be analysed and determined in detail

- Movements having dubious effects or not answering to a specific physiological purpose are not desirable

- The movements must be performed exactly in the prescribed form, otherwise the effect would suffer

- All physical education should be based upon ambidexterity and harmony; both halves, as well as all parts, of the body ought to be well exercised

- Exercises where the movements could not be controled, isolated and prescribed beforehand are not worth while from a physiological point of view

- The element of enjoyment is not very important
- Mass participation is better than individual activity

- Competition and striving for perfection can easily become an enemy to mass participation

- Gymnastic systems in other countries, especially the German "Turnen" with its horizontal and parallel bars, must be condemned or at least considered as far inferior to the Swedish system

- The Swedish system possesses general applicability; it could be used by all kind of persons for various purposes

The pronounced adherence to P.H. Ling and the strictly regulated system gave rise to a dogmatic attitude. In short the supporters of Hj. Ling were anxious to keep the system as it was. They worked hard to propagate it both within and outside the country. They were less interested in having their system examined, criticized or further developed. Lingianism therefore soon became a conservative force in Sweden as far as the ideological development is concerned. Of course, the situation was different in many other countries where Swedish gymnastics appeared as a new and foreign phenomenon.

4. The natural method

Gustaf Nyblaeus, director of the CCI 1862-1887, developed an alternative to Lingianism. Among other names he called it "den naturliga metoden" (the natural method). In fact it should be called an attitude rather than a full fledged and elaborated system or method. No crowd of true believers rallied round Nyblaeus. It was a part of his ideology not to restrict gymnastics too much. Nyblaeus was an ardent opponent of Lingianism. His ideas harmonized far better with sports and military training and it was no accident that he, himself a military officer (colonel), headed the department for military gymnastics (preferably fencing) at the CCI. It does not appear that he was particularly familiar with or interested in physiology. His ideas, presented in many somewhat superficial but instructive writings, 11) have been too neglected in the literature concerning Swedish gymnastic history.

Nyblaeus was a disciple of P.H. Ling. Although he fully acknowledged the merits of Ling, Nyblaeus took a more independent position than did the Lingianists. For instance, in one of his many aphorisms on gymnastics he made the following comment:

"Man får ursäkta att jag icke kan erkänna mer än en Ling, nämligen den äldre, såsom auktoritet i gymnastik och även denne blott villkorligt, ty ingenting är sant därför att Ling har sagt det." (One must forgive me for not being able to acknowledge more than one Ling, namely the senior, as an authority on gymnastics and even him only conditionally, for nothing is true just because Ling has said it.) 12)
Essential elements in the ideology of Nyblaeus were the so-called "naturliga rörelsesätten" (the natural ways of motion), mainly walking, running and jumping. He preferred exercises where these elements (especially running) were put in the forefront. The pentathlon of ancient Greece formed one of his models. According to Nyblaeus, it corresponded to what he called "frigymnastik" (free gymnastics), that is the natural ways of motion combined with free gymnastic exercises. Nyblaeus was not particularly interested in gymnastic exercises with apparatus, an idea which flourished more among the Lingianists. In 1882 he brought the idea of "den naturliga metoden" to public notice. In essence this consisted of his concept of "frigymnastik" which was ideologically based on the conviction that "den harmoniska utbildningen skall vinnas på den naturliga utvecklingsväg" (the harmonious education should be achieved by way of the natural development).13)

It seems clear that Nyblaeus' natural method grew up as a reaction to Lingianism. He criticized Hj. Ling for a too theoretical and too learned approach. According to Nyblaeus, Lingianism contained too much medical influences and too many restrictions, pedantry and artificialization. And finally Nyblaeus did not like the Lingianist method of splitting up every movement into its smallest component, preferring to see it as a unified whole.

5. Dualism at the GCI

Just as Lingianism has been characterized as a "formellt-educativ" (formal-educational) system 14), the natural method could be called a tendency for practical application. Both claimed to rest on the ideas of P.H. Ling. However it was not only a matter of conflicting ideas but also a struggle for leadership within Swedish gymnastics. Personal relations between the leading men deteriorated rapidly. Bitter animosity grew up between Lars Mauritz Törngren, who succeeded Hj. Ling as head of GCI's pedagogic department in 1882 and Viktor Gustaf Balck, who succeeded Nyblaeus as head of the military department in 1887. Both sides attracted many supporters. This rivalry split Swedish gymnastic professionals into two hostile camps which for decades operated in an atmosphere of mutual distrust.

Within the GCI this struggle for leadership manifested itself in a number of questions. For instance, the duty to inspect gymnastic exercises in the secondary schools was in 1882, after hard debates, transferred from Nyblaeus' military department to the pedagogic department under Törngren. Another question revolved about the specific gymnastic exercises (excluding fencing) adapted for military purpose that Nyblaeus used and strongly advocated. Hj. Ling and Törngren argued that pedagogic gymnastics was universal: "rörelselagarna äro gemensamma för alla människor, oberoende av yrken" (the laws of motion are common for all human beings irrespective of profession).15) Consequently, they should also be used for military purpose. By citing the specific advantages of the natural method for military
education, Nybladeus could maintain his position for a time, but in the long run his military gymnastics was replaced by the Lingianist system. A similar trend can be seen in regard to military exercises, which during the favourable wind of military defense in the 1860s were introduced in the primary and secondary schools. Moreover, physical exercises in the purely military education (regiments etc.) gradually turned over to Lingianism.

These and other examples show that the Lingianists were able to increase their influence. After some time they "controled" almost all public physical education, except for fencing and the like. It is no wonder that in such a situation Nybladeus and Balck began sympathizing with the idea of a separate military institute for gymnastics and fencing on the model of certain foreign institutes. After visiting the Berlin's military gymnastic institute in 1884, Balck reported positively on his experience at this institute.16) However from the Lingianist point of view a transformation of the military department of the GCI into a separate institute was not an attractive solution. The fact that such an institute was not established underlines the failure of Nybladeus and Balck.

6. The voluntary gymnastics and modern sports

After a few years of waiting leading Lingianists like Hj. Ling, Törngren (who followed Nybladeus as director of the GCI 1887-1907) and Truls Johan Hartelius (head teacher of the medical department 1864-1887) started to condemn the activities of voluntary gymnastics clubs. Balck, who became the great pioneer of the gymnastics and sports movement, was sharply criticized as the impressario for new and ominous tendencies. Primarily criticism was aimed at Stockholms gymnastikförening (Stockholm's Gymnastics Club), founded by Balck in 1875. This club had developed fairly active international contacts, as well as sponsored gymnastic demonstrations (festivals) and exercises outside the Lingianist program. A serious rupture in personal relations between Törngren and Balck occurred in 1878 due to Balck's engagement in the gymnastics clubs. Obviously the participation of schoolboys appeared especially annoying to the former as it meant that the same boys met with the Lingianist program in the compulsory school gymnastics and with more natural and sportive exercises according to the ideas of Nybladeus and Balck in the voluntary gymnastics clubs.

As regards modern sports the Lingianists were also negative. However, since they tended to ignore national folk games and all other physical exercises outside pedagogic gymnastics, sports did not appear as such a dangerous rival to their system as did the voluntary gymnastics.

The antagonism between the two approaches culminated at the International Gymnastics Demonstration in Stockholm in May 1891.17) Many gymnastics clubs from other countries had been invited. Although active troops from only Scandinavian countries
and England participated, this was by far the most comprehensive gymnastics event in Sweden before the turn of the century. The demonstration gave rise to acrimonious debate not only in professional circles but also in public opinion. Behind the scenes a number of intriguing activities were going on, showing that the Lingianists wanted to stop the demonstration and get rid of Balck. Debate over the demonstration reveals to a great extent the arguments and motives behind the antagonism. They can be summarized as follows.

The Lingianists claimed that:

- The organizers did not realize that the Swedish, or Ling, gymnastics system was superior to all (so-called) systems from abroad

- The non-Lingianist exercises might seem too attractive to the untutored minds of the public, thereby overshadowing the less spectacular Swedish system

- The Swedish system did not need any new elements or impulses from abroad but should develop from its own conditions

- The demonstration was an isolated event without any real significance for ordinary gymnastic work

- the public attitude to gymnastics, represented by the GCI and the gymnastics teachers in secondary schools etc., was undermined by such private demonstrations; the competence of the GCI had been violated

- By fostering a striving for individual skills such demonstrations would also undermine the idea that gymnastics should be an activity for all persons, irrespective of individual capability

The organizers replied that:

- The Lingianist system did not stand above all criticism

- Comparisons with gymnastics from other countries could stimulate and enrich Swedish gymnastics

- Even the Swedish gymnastics, somewhat boring as it could be, needed to be further developed

- According to experience gymnastics demonstrations could provide effective propaganda and thereby increase the clubs' membership

- The voluntarily organized gymnastics in Sweden attracted remarkably few persons, a fact that provided good reasons for direct action

- Demonstrations in front of a large audience were positive in
themselves

- The gymnastics clubs must be separated from school gymnastics and they should be totally free and independent from the GCI.

The demonstration was carried out in accordance with the original plans, with the exception of some small changes. Even though the majority of gymnastics teachers in the secondary schools publicly protested, the Lingianists did not succeed in stopping the demonstration. The leading opponents -- Törngren, Carl Norlander in Lund, Carl Silow at the GCI and others -- failed in their attempts at obtaining governmental support. Although they also tried hard to win the Royal House, Balck and his fellow-organizers were supported by the crown prince and other members of the Royal House. Judging by the demonstration's momentary success, the outcome must be considered as a victory for Nyblaeus (one of the patrons), Balck and their supporters.

The daily press was divided. Most Conservative papers supported the Lingianists, while the organizers were backed by Liberal papers. After 1891 no such event occurred in Sweden for a long time. The gymnastics clubs continued developing poorly. Foreign elements, such as individual competition, horizontal and parallel bars etc., were not introduced. And the schools remained a stronghold for Lingianism. Thus judging by the course of subsequent developments, it must be conceded that Lingianist opposition was far from a complete failure.

7. Conclusion

Although both Lingianists and Nyblaeus referred to the ideas of P.H. Ling, the former emphasized strict adherence to the original Ling gymnastics stronger than did Nyblaeus. This does not mean that they really were closer followers of P.H. Ling. It should rather be noted that Lingianism and the natural method of Nyblaeus were based on different interpretations of the ideas and intentions of Ling. Because his precise line of thought is difficult to reconstruct and the long period of Branting as the director of the GCI caused a break in the continuity between P.H. Ling and later developments, it is doubtful whether one will ever be able to ascertain which of the two approaches constituted the "true" adherence to P.H. Ling.

After the split between Lingianism and the natural method, from the 1870s onwards, the Lingianists led by Hj. Ling and Törngren, gradually expanded their sphere of influence. Soon their system predominated in all areas of public education. Desirous of expanding to all groups and countries it became a very influential force in the world of physical education. Claiming to have brought about a more or less ideal system, the Lingianists took a conservative attitude regarding new ideas.

In this situation the voluntarily organized gymnastics and modern sports emerged as new and exiting realities. They offe-
red an excellent opportunity to Nyblaeus and Balck to expand their ideas and influence in a field, where the Lingianists could not easily claim to be masters. What was lost in the sphere of public education could be compensated for in the area of private gymnastics and sports clubs. The natural method harmonized very well with most exercises in these clubs. But this method, somewhat vague and little elaborated, was in the long run absorbed by these same clubs; it had played its historical rôle as an early alternative to Lingianism.

As the influential director of the GCI, Nyblaeus acted as an appreciated patron and ideologist of the early gymnastics and sports movement. He represented a direct link between P.H. Ling and modern sports. He convincingly defined his significance in one of his last aphorisms: "Min förtjänst om gymnastiken är väsentlig, att jag velat giva den riktning till Idrott; verkställigheten härav tillkommer förnämligast Balck" (My services to gymnastics is essentially that I have wanted to give it impulses to sports; the execution hereof mainly belongs to Balck). 18)

In this manner the profound schism within Swedish gymnastics became a rivalry between the public sphere and the private sphere, between compulsory school-gymnastics and the early gymnastics and sports clubs. This turned out to be a disastrous development for voluntary gymnastics, which for a long time remained remarkably underdeveloped in the country of P.H. Ling.

References

1) LINDHARD, J., Nogle undersøgelser angaaende den svenske Sygegymnastiks oprindelse. I-II (København 1944-45). PRYTZ, S., P.H. Ling og hans gymnastikpaedagogiske indsats (Køpen-
hamm 1941). Cf. for example HIRN, A., Ursprung und Wesen des Sports (Berlin 1941), 2, 207-09, and HEIKE, V., Gymnastikens historia (Helsingfors 1905-09), 327-47.


3) The main findings of Westerblad are published in: Ling. Tidshistoriska undersökningar I (1913) - IV:2 (1946). They comprise about 800 pages. See also the same author: Hjalmar Ling. Hans levnad och hans betydelse (Malmö 1939).

4) DRAKENBERG, S., contributions in Kungliga etc. (see note 9); HOLMBERG, O., Den svenska gymnastikens utveckling. Per Henrik Ling och hans verk (Stockholm 1939); MOBERG, G., Svenska gymnastikens märkesmän (Stockholm 1920) and Hjalmar Ling. Hans systematisering av gymnastiken (Malmö 1941); WIBERG, A., Gymnastikhistoriska studier. Forskningar och
strövtåg i äldre svensk gymnastik- och idrottshistoria (Växjö 1942-49).

5) Svensk författningssamling 1864:5. For this section and in general, see LINDESSERT, J., Idrottens väg till folkröstelse. Studier i svensk idrottsrörelse till 1915 (Studia historica Upsaliensia 60, Upsala 1974).

6) Printed 1834-40 (published posthumously the last mentioned year).

7) The gymnastics writings of P.H. Ling have been exhaustively commented by WESTERBLAD, C.A., 1913 (see note 3), 13-53.


9) Kungliga gymnastiska centralinstitutets historia 1813-1913 (Stockholm 1913), 193-96.

10) LING, Hj., Om pedagogiska föreningens discussion öfver skolgymnastiken (1856-63), annex 2, 41-42.

11) For instance the following (NYBLAEUS, G.,): Något om gymnastik och vapenöfning såsom medel för allmän uppfostran (Stockholm 1863); Militärgymnastik eller den allmänna gymnastikens användning för militärisk utbildning (Stockholm 1881); Om frigymnastiken och den gymnastiska metoden (Stockholm 1882); 100 gymnastiska aforismer (Stockholm 1889); Gymnastiska aforismer. Ny serie (Stockholm 1895).


13) Om frigymnastiken etc. (see note 11), 23-24.

14) MOBERG 1941 (see note 4), 21.

15) Memorial of Törngren and Hartelius to the directorate of the GCI 1882:5 (National Archives, Stockholm).

16) Balck's report is printed in: Krigsverenskapsakademiens Tidskrift 1884:22-23.

17) For the demonstration, see LINDESSERT, J. (note 5), chapter 8.

18) Aphorism 27/3 1902 (G. Nyblaeus' papers, Gymnastik- och idrottshögskolan, Stockholm).