

# THE ORGANISMIC APPROACH IN SPORT

*Fall 1987*

My interest in the application of an organismic psychotherapy for sport ignited during a chance encounter on an airplane with the Italian soccer club Torino. The squad was on its way to a pre-season invitational tournament in Amsterdam, where they would play against Dinamo Kiev, Ajax Amsterdam and Porto during the second weekend of August, 1987. Noticing the enormous energy and male camaraderie about me, I asked the portly man to my left in the presence of which club was I sitting? Federico Bonetto, the Direttore Sportivo for Torino, and I began discussing the relative absence of “calcio” in the States. I hazarded the notion that all the ‘spectacle’ Bonetto seemed to admire in American football was not sport, at least not in the European sense. As one European observed, correctly or uncorrectly, over seventy years ago:

“The American conception of sport goes far beyond the notions of the easy-going European... Look at your sports! They are the toughest, the most reckless, and the most efficient in the world. The idea of mere play has almost entirely disappeared, while in other parts of the world, the idea of play still prevails rather than that of professional sport. Your sport demands a training that is almost cruel and an application that is almost inhuman. Your sportsman are gladiators, every inch of them, and the excitement of the spectators derives from ancient instincts that are akin to bloodlust” (C. G. Jung)

This reminds me of the scene from an Italian movie I recently saw set in Chicago and starring Marcello Mastroianni as an aging Italian prize-fighter. Penniless, he gains entrance to a practice ring where a tough black man is working out. “Do you know why so many (american) blacks are great boxers?” “Because you are naturally great athletes, no?” “No! Because we are hungrier.”

I mentioned casually to Signor Bonetto that I have had some indirect professional contact with the Italian world of sport. That I am giving individual organismic psychotherapy training sessions to a former Italian national track and field champion, and to the former psychiatrist of the Italian Federation of Winter Sport (National Olympic Team) and currently a professor of medicine.

Signor Bonetto asked how I work. From his perspective, an interesting question to have to respond to. How does one work as a body psychotherapist, interested, as I told him, in the more harmonious relationship of body to psyche – with sports champions or aspiring sports champions, apparently interested more in improving bodily efficiency than in “play”. I mentioned to him that the man with whom I have trained for the past twelve years, Malcolm Brown, had worked for several years with the squadra nazionale di sci. He had worked with individual Italian ski champions, both male and female, as well as the entire team and its trainers at their training camp. The Italian Federation for Winter Sport was pre-occupied with the rapid burn out of the skiers in whom they were investing so much. They were skiing too much from a tight and gritty exterior, rather than including in their performance deeper more resilient core musculature and related visceral apparatus.

At least two problems emerge working with goal oriented athletes. First, is that practical results would be slow coming. My impression is that Malcolm, for instance, was faced with strong ego resistance from the trainers, who wanted quicker results (and eventually he stopped working with the Skiers). At that time, a generation of international skiing champions was eclipsing, and no stars were rising to replace them. The team entered a slump for several years. But one skiing champion who had taken a series of organismic psychotherapy sessions, Gustavo Thoeni, became

and still is allenatore tecnico for the national team. “E il nazionale sta riprendendo”, I was recently informed. “Perhaps the stato di animo of a deeper than simply ego approach, that utilizes more of the organism, did penetrate these trainers and their skiers” I commented to Bonetto.

There is no doubt that the *ragazzi* of Torino have beautiful, earth-grounded bodies – just observing the exuberance, and the full powerful force of their legs as they bounced off airplane, joking, bounding along towards their first match with Ajax. Which they lost. They later defeated Porto.

Signor Bonetto asks: “but how long does such body therapy take?” You tell me, I responded. How does one measure the time required to more fully embody the soul, aspects of which have remained unconscious, for lack of full nurture in the first years of life, or worse, because of painful and now numbed out early childhood experiences, which caused a withdrawal of much of the blood and being to the core for self-protection.

Working thus with athletes using organismic psychotherapy, is not the same as “preparing” the body, is not the same as “exploiting” the body, is not directed towards “controlling” the body to make it into an instrument, as track star turned organismic therapist Lorenzo Manfredini observes in his book, *Dinamica comportamentale per gioco* (Dynamic behaviour for play). When the astute reporter for RAI (Radio-televisione Italiana) Lilli Gruber recently interviewed the Italian shot-putter (lancio peso) Andrei, who had in one day in mid-August of this year broken the world shot-put record three times, he admitted with what seemed a tinge of embarrassment, when asked, that “yes, computer analysis had helped”. From where within Andrei’s being came that tinge of embarrassment?

It is best to come out into the open immediately with the fact that successful work with the full organism, including the dark, less conscious and too often disregarded endodermal depths wrings with it an emergence to consciousness of aspects of the being more related to the non-linear mystery of blood flow, something Italians instinctively understand better than many peoples. As the blood more fully flows in the depths and then towards the surface, what emerges in the client cannot be predicted. Will a fuller living from within, a full bodied, creative exploration of whatever emerges psychologically and is grounded as sensation lead to victories on the playing field? It is the responsibility of the wise Direttore Sportivo to choose for an organismic psychotherapy training those players and coaches who can live from their anima, who can respect the power that will result, and who will be fascinated by the creative task of living with and from such power. “Vorrei approfondire questo discorso” (I would like to deepen this discussion) were Signor Bonetto’s last words, as he rose to mingle, joke around with, and encourage his team.