Edited by Francesco Negro

WOOD IN SPORT EQUIPMENT
HERITAGE, PRESENT, PERSPECTIVE
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Edited by
Francesco Negro

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The icons represent some of the sports considered in the book (including all sports would have resulted in too small images for proper visualization). The wooden equipment is outlined by the colors of the wood species from which it is made, and by lines representing the grain of wood and the characteristics of the relative wood-based products.

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A SENSATIONAL DISCOVERY

In September 2021, a ski, dating from around 700 AD and obviously made of wood, was found near the Norwegian town of Lillehammer, the site of the 1994 Winter Olympics. In 2014, a similar object was found in the same area: the seven-year wait for the progressive melting of the glacier allowed the discovery of the ‘twin’ ski, which occurred in 2021.

The ski found in 2021 is 187 centimeters long and 17 centimeters wide. The skis from Lillehammer are not the first pre-Viking skis to be unearthed. However, they are among the few, along with the pair found in Mänttä, Finland, which retained a component that is key for a better understanding of their use: the binding. Made of birch wood and leather, the ski binding discovered in 2021 (more complete and better preserved than that from 2014) allowed the toe of the shoe to be locked, and the heel to move relatively freely. This suggests that the technique of downhill skiing now called telemark was already known in Norway in the early Middle Ages. It takes little creativity to imagine scenarios not too different from those seen in the Alps in the early decades of the 20th century, when daring men slid down snow-covered mountains. What separates the medieval practice of skiing from that of the pioneers of this sport is not so much the constructional characteristics of the equipment, but the function for which it was intended.

Skis crafted and used 1300 years ago, in terms of shape, size and technology, did not differ too much from the one my grandfather portrayed in 1930 on the ‘snow fields’ (at that time there was no talk of slopes) of the Lanzo Valley, Italy (FIGURE 4.1).

FIGURE 4.1 Skis used in the first decades of the 1900s were still quite similar to those used during the 700s (image A. Perissinotto).
What makes twentieth-century skiing modern is the recreational dimension associated with it, as opposed to the functional dimension of pre-Viking skiing that was above all a means of movement, hunting, and therefore survival.

The journey from functionality and utilitarianism to the fun of symbolic play is common to almost all sports. The aim of this short chapter is therefore to examine the socially operated re-semanticization of activities and materials that were once part of everyday production, and now make up the symbolic universe we call ‘Sport’. Rowing becomes sport when the act of rowing loses its utilitarian function and when the boat itself, becoming narrower, loses its potential as a means of transport. The rower's rowing thus becomes a gesture devoid of practical utility and rich in symbolic value, a symbol of strength and power. Riding a horse becomes horseback riding when the horse and the rider symbolically reproduce jumps and strides made during combat without the need to win a war or even to save one’s life. The list could go on and on, with a number of examples all fitting into the framework of the ‘socially regulated conflict’ of which Simmel (1923) speaks.

We might mistakenly think that a sporting activity (e.g., rowing) becomes such only when its corresponding utilitarian activity (e.g., transport by boat) is completely exhausted, surpassed by other more modern and technologically advanced activities. In reality, this does not always happen, in fact, much more frequently, functional and symbolic activities continue in parallel. The case of the bicycle as studied by Wiebe E. Bjiker (1997) is emblematic in this sense. Immediately after conquering the world of bourgeois and popular mobility, supplanting the aristocratic horse and the even more aristocratic velocipede in urban spaces, the bicycle became an instrument of sporting competition. Its capacity to generate a mythology of sport (Perissinotto, 2019) is in direct relation to its diffusion at the functional level. Similarly, the symbolic dimension can actually constitute a memorial preservation of the functional one and can long survive the disappearance of the former. The last cavalry charge of the Italian army took place at Isbuscenskij, on the river Don, on 24 August 1942. Today, eighty years later, Italian horsemanship, often practiced by military athletes, repeats some gestures of a war technique, in a logic of ‘regulated conflict’ that is now out of time.

FUNCTIONAL VS. SYMBOLIC

Do functional and symbolic constitute an opposition as indicated in the title of this paragraph? Yes, they do, but this does not exclude their coexistence, just as in the case of the bicycle described above. The bicycle that took the worker to the factory in the early 1900s and the one (almost identical at the time) that led the champion to victory on the roads of the Tour de France coexisted at the same time and on the same roads. But to understand the nature of the dialectic between the functional and the symbolic in sport, we shall go much further back, even as far as the Odyssey.

We are in book VIII, Ulysses has just been shipwrecked on the land of the Phaeacians and, after narrating the sad adventures that have led him there, he bursts into tears. The king of the Phaeacians, Alcinoo, organizes running and throwing competitions (javelin, discus, etc.) to distract him; however, wiping away his guest’s tears is only one of the monarch’s aims, the real aim can be read between verse 95 and 105:

And straightway he spoke among the Phaeacians, lovers of the oar: 'Hear me, ye leaders and counsellors of the Phaeacians, already have we satisfied our hearts with the equal banquet and with the lyre, which is the companion of the rich feast. But now let us go forth, and make trial of all manner of games, that yon stranger may tell his friends, when he returns home, how far we excel other men in boxing and wrestling and leaping and in speed of foot.

The sporting contests serve to transform the strength of the Phaeacians into a sign
which, thanks to its immateriality, can cross the seas carried by the memory of Odysseus and strike fear into the other peoples of the Mediterranean. In other words, the sporting showdown, the symbolic and regulated conflict, serves as a deterrent to real conflicts, generates "effective signs", real linguistic acts and real symbols endowed with functional value. This apparent oxymoron demonstrates the possible cohabitation of the two terms in question.

On the other hand, most human activities produce functions and symbols at the same time, albeit in different proportions. The sign aspect, i.e., the communicative value of the artefact, appears in some cases as a sort of byproduct, in other cases as the main product, in others still as the only real result of production. Let us explain this with a few examples. In building a house, the primary objective is to create a shelter and a space where one or more people can live. Nevertheless, that same house becomes, at the same time and almost despite itself, a sign of human presence: the value of the artefact “house” is mainly inherent in its materiality, is mainly functional, and, residually, communicative. If I build a bell tower or a minaret instead of a house, the weight of the symbolic function of my artefact increases. It is true that the materiality of the bell tower serves to support the bells and that of the minaret serves to house the muezzin who calls the faithful to pray, but their purpose is above all to mark the territory and characterize it as belonging to a certain religious community. Finally, in the case of a cross, a crescent moon or a bust of Lenin to be placed on the summit of a mountain, the functional aspect of the artefact will be irrelevant compared to the communicative one. Similarly, in sporting activities there are different balances between functionality and symbolism. A person who, in the privacy of his own room, performs exercises with continuity and application to improve the mobility of an injured limb, is performing an almost exclusively functional activity. If we transfer that same person to a gym, in contact with other individuals with similar problems, his physical effort, while remaining aimed at recovery and then action on his body, becomes an example and a stimulus for others, that is, it communicates something. At the other extreme, we have sports such as ski jumping or figure skating which communicate with the public and the jury their raison d’être, at least at a competitive level.

FROM FUNCTIONAL TO SYMBOLIC (ROUND TRIP): THE FATE OF WOOD

As this entire book aims to demonstrate, the destiny of wood and that of sport have been, and still are, inextricably linked. It is possible that such a link is also consolidated by the transitions that like sport, wood makes between the two polarities - functional and symbolic. Until the 1960s, wood was the preferred material for most sport equipment: skis, snowshoes, hockey or baseball sticks, etc. It is well-known that first metallic and then synthetic materials have taken over more and more space over the years. The same has happened in non-sporting activities, in civil engineering as well as in automotive, in workshop tools as well as in kitchen tools, in furniture as well as in upholstery. But just as war activities have entered the symbolic universe of sport, so too has wood, which nonetheless has retained a wide range of functional uses, being able to enter a symbolic universe and become a sign of itself. The grain of the various types of wood photographed and reproduced on the most diverse materials (plastic adhesive films, ceramic stoneware tiles, melamine cladding, PVC flooring) and on the most diverse objects (car sides and dashboards, furnishings, etc.) is evidence of a transition from functional to symbolic. The “wood effect” or the less euphemistic “fake wood”, just like the sign in Peirce’s sense, are something that replaces wood not in the totality of its possibilities, but according to a precise aspect, that is, through a link of similarity. When abandoned and surpassed by new technologies, wood is replaced by its own image, by the symbol. Or even, as is the case with certain types of skis, the invisible wood hidden in the core of the tool is symbolically
exhibited on the outside, with the word “woodcore” prominently displayed (FIGURE 4.2). And in that symbolic permanence there remains, however, a degree of aesthetic and emotional functionality, a possibility of referring in sign form, to a universe of sensations that only wood can give.

![Figure 4.2](image)

**FIGURE 4.2** The term “woodcore” is prominently displayed on this ski to highlight the presence of wood inside (image A. Perissinotto).

**REFERENCES**


It is hard to draw a conclusion for a book that deals with such a vast topic as the one considered here. In fact, the size of the theme was clear to me when I prepared the book project and submitted it to the World Wood Day Foundation. Nonetheless, its vastness has become more and more impressive during the drafting of the book. While discussing the content of the chapters with coauthors, who I thank once again for their valuable collaboration, the common challenge of staying concise arose several times. During such talks we repeatedly commented that we were writing a book, but an encyclopedia would have been needed instead.

It therefore seems appropriate to conclude this book by looking at why this topic is so extensive. In short, I believe there are three main reasons, quite evident indeed: wood and sport are vast worlds, they have widely interacted over the ages, and they are of key importance to humankind. It is not surprising that such conditions have given shape to a universe, made of tradition, passion, know-how, innovation, diversity, performance, health, culture, and so on. It is fascinating to see how wood and sport are continuously shaping this universe, and how many paths they are taking year after year.

As a matter of fact, in some cases they have parted ways after a long time. As already mentioned in various chapters, today wood has become residual or outdated in various disciplines, and its future use is in doubt in many others. Synthetic, high-performing materials have in fact gained great space over recent decades. This is surely a relevant challenge to the future interaction between wood and sport. Nonetheless, in many cases, such interaction is well established and not only: often it goes beyond being well established, and wood and sport continue to deliver great results together. Based on the above elements, a complex and mixed perspective can be envisaged for the years to come, with a broad range of possible evolutions that depend on the disciplines considered. In this sense, the development of innovative, high-performing wood-based composites can have interesting perspectives.

Above all, a new element has strongly emerged over recent years and will likely gain even more importance in the future. Wood and sport have in fact found a pivotal territory to collaborate on: sustainability. This can add new meaning and richness to their universe. While providing their well-known benefits to humankind, they can now join forces to markedly contribute to a more sustainable world. This is a great challenge and, as is often the case, also a great opportunity.

I have confidence in them and am eager to see where they go.

Francesco Negro