

Amundson, Ron. "Handicap ." *Encyclopedia of Disability*. 2005. SAGE Publications.

▣ **HANDICAP**

The term *handicap* was used during the twentieth century to apply both to the impairments of individuals and to certain ways of evening the chances of success among contestants in sporting contests. With the rise of the disability rights movement in the past quarter of the century, the term's association with paternalistic attitudes toward disability has made *handicap* objectionable to many activists. Folk etymologies have grown up to explain why the term is offensive. It is often claimed that the original meaning of handicap referred to the fact that people with impairments could make a living only by begging, "cap in hand." This etymology is mistaken. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, the best etymological source on the English language, shows a much more interesting and complex history of the term.

Handicap originally referred to a sort of gambling game, practiced between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. One move in the game involved two contestants placing their hands in a cap and removing them at the same time, either open or closed (hence "hand in cap"). The game involved estimating the difference in value between two items. Some value (called the "boot" or "odds") was added to one item to make it equal in value to the other. During the seventeenth century, the technique of equaling the values of two items by addition of a boot was adopted in horse racing. A "handicap race" is one in which the faster horse carries extra weight. The game of golf adopted a system in which less skilled golfers were allowed to deduct strokes from their score, to be competitive with more skilled opponents. In horse racing and the gambling game, the term *handicap*

referred to the game itself, not to the factor (the boot) that evened its outcomes. In golf, the handicap is a benefit for the less skilled, not a penalty on the more skilled.

In the late nineteenth century, the term came to be applied to disadvantages themselves, though not yet to impairments. The first recorded use with respect to impairments was in a 1915 poster labeled "the Handicapped Child."

Impairments were commonly called handicaps during the twentieth century, but the older sporting uses continued. In 1980, the World Health Organization (WHO) introduced another new definition according to which *handicap* referred not to an impairment itself but to the disadvantages that resulted from social discrimination against people with impairments. But by this time the term was distasteful to many. *Handicap* was offensive by association. The folk etymologies about "cap in hand" begging are mistaken, but they reflect a very real distrust of traditional attitudes toward disability.

Unfortunately, the loss of the term *handicap* creates a semantic vacuum in the American vocabulary of disability politics. British activists (unlike Americans) use the term *disability* to refer to what the WHO called *handicap*: the disadvantages caused by discriminatory treatment of people with impairments. They distinguish between impairments (biological conditions) and disability or disablement (the consequences of social arrangements). Americans use the term *disability* as a synonym of *impairment*. How do Americans refer to the social disadvantages? The 1980 WHO vocabulary had distinguished disability from handicap, the same distinction as the British but with different terminology. But because the term *handicap* was rejected as offensive, both in Britain and the United States, Americans are left without a simple term to designate the disadvantages that social arrangements create for people with impairments.

—Ron Amundson

See also *Cripple*; Impairment; International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health.

Further Readings

World Health Organization. 1980. *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps: A Manual of Classification Relating to the Consequences of Disease*. Geneva: World Health Organization.