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Sports are enjoyed by men and women, children and adults, and people of all ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds. Sports also are big business. According to publisher Street & Smith, spectatorial and participatory sports in America generated more than $200 billion in 2011—twice as much as the automobile industry.

Americans spend billions of dollars each year on sporting equipment alone. The two most popular participatory sports—fishing and hunting—lead the way: By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, some 30 million Americans spent more than $40 billion annually on fishing gear, while more than 12 million spent upwards of $25 billion on hunting equipment.

Spectator sports are bigger than ever. Americans devote more of their leisure time to watching sports—on television, in person, or through other forms of media such as the Internet—than they do taking part in them. American television networks produce some 2,100 hours of sports programming per year, with thousands more on cable; ESPN alone televises 24 hours a day, seven days a week, or about 8,500 hours each year. Americans are spending increasing sums of money on spectator sports—$22.4 billion in 2010.

As a result, professional sports franchises have become extremely valuable. The New York Yankees, for example, were worth a reported $1.7 billion in 2011, while the average Major League Baseball (MLB) team was valued at $523 million. The leader in the National Football League (NFL) in 2010 (the latest available data) was the Dallas Cowboys, valued at $1.8 billion, with a team average of $1.02 billion. The leading franchise in the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 2011 was the New York Knicks, worth a reported $655 million, while the NBA average was $369 million per team. And in the National Hockey League (NHL), the most valuable franchise was the Toronto Maple Leafs at $505 million, with a league average of $228 million per team. Major college athletic programs continue to expand as well, with budgets of $40

Perhaps no country in the world has embraced sports—in both their spectatorial and their participatory forms—quite like the United States. Certainly, as the historical emphasis of this encyclopedia reveals, no other country has embraced sports so readily and so enthusiastically. Since colonial times, sports in America have been a major source of entertainment, a form of recreation, and a way of achieving physical fitness. Sports have helped define who Americans are, even as Americans have put their own stamp on sports.

Americans have participated in sports throughout the nation’s history. Native Americans, of course, had their hunting- and war-related games in pre-Columbian times, while European colonists and African slaves brought their own forms of athletic diversion. However, the term “sport” has changed over time. In the seventeenth century, “sport” referred to virtually any diversion. Thus, for the Puritans, playing cards, bowling, and shooting at a target were all sports. By the eighteenth century, the term had narrowed to a more modern meaning: competitive athletic activities governed by a set of rules or customs.

By any definition, sports always have been interwoven into the fabric of American life, promoting traditional values among the well-established, aiding acculturation among newly arrived immigrants, and reinforcing pride in shared ethnic identity. In fact, sports have been, and continue to be, a source of local, regional, and national pride for many Americans.

Participation in sports has served as a means of certifying social status and as a venue for promoting manliness and fitness and, later, feminine skill and strength. Sports provide myriad business opportunities as well as occupations for athletes, coaches, and many others. Sports hold up a mirror to society, reflecting trends in ethnicity, race, class, and gender. In essence, sports have come to represent a virtual social institution, one shaped by forces such as bureaucratization, immigration, industrialization, and urbanization.

As of the early twenty-first century, interest in sports, both active and passive, is at an all-time high. Sports are enjoyed by men and women, children and adults, and people of all ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds. Sports also are big business. According to publisher Street & Smith, spectatorial and participatory sports in America generated more than $200 billion in 2011—twice as much as the automobile industry.

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Introduction

This encyclopedia is divided into three sections. A series of long essays covers the history of American sports from colonial times to the twenty-first century. An A-to-Z section—the bulk of the book—covers a wide array of topics, including major athletes, teams, and institutions; individual and team sports; and broader thematic topics, such as business, media, immigration, and diplomacy. The book also includes a variety of ancillary materials, such as a thematic topic finder, a directory of leading sports organizations and leagues, a general bibliography, and a detailed index. In addition, each article offers a specialized list of recommended further readings, and A-to-Z entries also include cross references to related entries.

Generally, this work serves two purposes: First, it provides a comprehensive history of American sports—both in their spectatorial and their participatory forms—from the nation’s beginnings to the present day. This is not the kind of history that you will find in conventional sports reference works, such as almanacs or, increasingly, on the Internet. But what they usually cannot find there is analysis and contextualization—what sports have meant to American history and society for the past 400 years—and an examination of how sports have evolved from a morally suspect form of fringe entertainment to become a treasured national institution and an integral part of our daily lives. For that, intellectually curious fans—as well as those who are not fans—can find much to explore in this work.

Acknowledgments

This project has truly been a marathon and not a sprint. The encyclopedia originated in 2005 under the sponsorship of James Ciment, a scholar and consulting editor for M.E. Sharpe. I began the endeavor with the close support and advice of Melvin Adelman and Patricia Vertinsky, who played a critical role in putting together our table of contents. I received wise suggestions from the distinguished editorial board of Allan Guttman, Colin Howell, Michael Lomax, Michael Oriard, Roberta J. Park, and Benjamin G. Rader.

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Steven A. Riess
Essays
Sports were an important element of life in the American colonies from the earliest days. Colonists used the term “sport” to refer to any pastime or diversion, including traditional athletic contests encompassing tests of strength, skill, manliness, and honor.

During the seventeenth century, sporting options were restricted in New England because of stringent Puritan beliefs, which frowned on sports that promoted idleness, gambling, and the desecration of the Sabbath, although uplifting activities, such as marksmanship, were permitted. Farther south, Anglican Virginians enjoyed gambling and blood sports, though not on the Sabbath. In general, popular sports derived from the colonists’ English heritage, the social class of the participants, and their proximity to woods for hunting, bodies of water for fishing, and the presence of deadly enemies, which required skills such as shooting.

In the eighteenth century, support for sports became more widespread, and colonists nearly everywhere enjoyed a varied sporting life made possible by greater security, a more cosmopolitan worldview, declining religious orthodoxy, commercialization, a changing social structure, and urbanization. Cities were disproportionately important sites of organized sporting competition, especially commercialized sport, even though 95 percent of the population lived in rural areas. Urban residents provided a substantial sporting audience for publicans, or tavern keepers, who were the earliest sports promoters.

The presence of concentrated populations facilitated the development of the first sports clubs, which promoted angling, horse racing, and other sports practiced by the English gentry and the well-to-do in London. These associations helped members of the colonial social and economic elite separate themselves from their social inferiors. Governments were drawn into the sporting nexus to protect community norms and morality, maintain order, and prevent the pleasure of the few from interfering with the business of the many— developments that foreshadowed future trends in the history of American sports.

**Seventeenth-Century Sports**

British colonists began participating in sports as soon as they arrived in North America, playing the same games they had enjoyed in the villages and towns of England.

**Virginia**

One of the causes of early labor problems in the colony of Jamestown, Virginia, historians have noted, was that its first inhabitants often spent time bowling when they should have been working, or hunted game when they had been assigned to tend cattle. In 1611, Governor Thomas Dale found it necessary to impose laws forbidding hunting for pleasure on the Sabbath, and one year later, the “Lawes Divine, Morall and Martial” banned card playing and wasting gunpowder by shooting at game. In 1619, the Virginia House of Burgesses called for strict enforcement of the Sabbath and banned gambling; however, over time, these laws were laxly enforced.

The most important sport in Virginia, and eventually all of British North America, was horse racing, the favorite pastime of the English aristocracy. American racing originated in New York in 1665, a year after the British took over the colony of New Netherland. Governor Richard Nicolls organized annual races at the Newmarket Course in Hempstead, Long Island, named in honor of the home of English racing. By the end of the century, the sport was enjoyed in Boston and Philadelphia, despite the gambling, swearing, and wild riding in city streets that it engendered.

The “sport of kings” was dominated in the late seventeenth century by the wealthy planters of Virginia, who rode their own workhorses in short races of about
a quarter mile (0.4 kilometers). As historian Timothy Breen has pointed out, the sport reflected their materialism, individuality, and competitiveness.

The livelihood of Virginia’s tobacco growers was itself a high-risk venture, vulnerable to cold, frosts, plagues, cargo lost to shipwrecks, and the vagaries of the market. As a counterpoint to their volatile business, planters enjoyed racing and high-stakes gambling with their peers as forms of recreation, though arranged matches and wagers were taken very seriously and considered legally binding contracts.

Planters also took part in racing to demonstrate their courage, brawn, intelligence, and honor, and to promote a sense of shared values and consciousness among the racing and gambling gentry. Furthermore, the rituals of the contests encouraged a fellowship between the landed elite and mass spectators that reinforced traditional patterns of respect and deference.

New Netherland

Farther north, the Dutch burghers of New Amsterdam and Albany also enjoyed sports. By 1631, residents ventured outside the village walls on fishing and hunting parties. In addition, the townsfolk enjoyed traditional Dutch sports such as boat racing, bowling, golfing, skating, and sledding. But there were conflicts over the appropriateness of some sporting activities. In 1647, for example, Governor Peter Stuyvesant banned Sunday recreation.

Massachusetts Bay Colony

The Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony was founded in 1629 as a homogeneous community of “visible saints” who shared strict Calvinist beliefs and values and expected to make their settlement a Christian role model. Thus, they strictly maintained the Sabbath and prohibited any entertainment that they viewed as a waste of time, that distracted people from their public responsibilities, or that encouraged sinful behavior. Animal baiting, fighting, Sunday sports, and all games associated with gambling were barred. Religious and civic leaders were particularly leery of amusements at inns and taverns because of their association with drunkenness and gambling, and so they regulated such pastimes closely from the start.

At mid-century, the colony banned bowling and shuffleboard because of their association with gambling. Gambling was a sin according to Puritan theology, for two reasons: 1) because bettors coveted their neighbor’s property, and 2) because making money without labor denied the godly obligation to work hard at one’s “calling,” the occupation that God ordained for each person.

Nonetheless, athletic activities were permitted if they were viewed as useful and productive, such as hunting game or dangerous animals like wolves or fishing (which, strictly speaking, was work and not leisure), or if the activities were self-improving. The Massachusetts Body of Liberties (1641) guaranteed all householders the right to hunt birds and fish on public land. Marksmanship was encouraged to develop skills needed for hunting, as well as for fighting Indians.

The principal site of public sports in Boston was the Common, which was established in 1634 for grazing cattle and military training, but also was used for
executions, whippings, and burials. Martial arts such as archery and musketry were practiced when authorities required “military muster,” an event called Training Day. By the late seventeenth century, Training Day was a time for a general town revel, a day when boys chased greased pigs, raced each other, and played ball games, or went ice-skating, depending on the season. On such days, militiamen engaged in contests of marksmanship, horse and foot races, and wrestling.

Urban Puritans also regulated sports that interfered with orderly town life. Town leaders believed that it was essential to maintain the safety of city streets in order to protect pedestrians and to keep thoroughfares open for traffic and commerce. Inconsiderate youths disrupted free movement with their games and made it dangerous to walk on Boston’s narrow streets.

Indeed, so many Bostonians were injured by youths playing football that laws were passed in 1657, 1677, and 1701 banning the sport. In 1672, the Essex County Court also barred horse racing within 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) of any town meetinghouse, not only to prevent betting, but also to protect pedestrians from speeding horses. In 1710, the General Court of Massachusetts forbade shooting at pigeons or targets in Boston, in response to public concerns about guns being shot in crowded areas and stray bullets striking innocent bystanders.

**Pennsylvania**

In 1682, William Penn established Pennsylvania as a haven for dissenting English Quakers. Like the Puritans, Quakers believed that sports, games, and “loose behavior” diverted man from work, devotion to God, and the “First Day” (the Sabbath). Thus, the Pennsylvania Assembly prohibited “rude and riotous sports” such as bull baiting and cockfighting to better exercise social control over those outside the Society of Friends.

The Pennsylvania government also discouraged attendance at sporting contests for fear that excited crowds would detract from public discipline. Running races were opposed, because they stimulated such sins as the wish to excel (vanity) and gambling (coveting another’s property). A 1705 provincial edict prohibited 14 different tavern games, including billiards, ninepins, and shuffleboard; however, as elsewhere, such laws were not always heeded.

**Eighteenth-Century Sports**

By the turn of the eighteenth century, third-generation Puritans were less committed than the early settlers to their creed, and they took a more liberal view of sports. The Reverend Cotton Mather, in his “Advice to a Young Man” (1709), promoted lawful and moderate sport under parental supervision to teach traditional values and to establish closer bonds between fathers and sons.

There was a notable increase in sporting activities during the eighteenth century throughout the colonies as communities became more developed and religious scruples less limiting, and as sports became more organized and commercialized. At the same time, social class became even more important, as members of the upper class sought to emulate the rustic pastimes of the English gentry.

Colonists took advantage of nearby waters to enjoy aquatic sports, particularly swimming, rowing, and boating in the summer and ice-skating in the winter. Philadelphians had a reputation as the best skaters in the world and as fine swimmers, many of whom were taught by Benjamin Franklin. Girls were not allowed to swim with men, but they did visit the New Jersey shore on family vacations and swam in the ocean there.

**Taverns**

Colonial cities had a sufficient number of residents who were interested in sports to encourage publicans to become the first sports promoters and to persuade businessmen to sell sporting equipment that was imported from England. Tavern keepers recognized that they could make substantial profits by promoting sports to thirsty men. They sponsored sporting contests by providing the necessary equipment, such as billiard tables, outdoor bowling lanes, or targets for marksmen, as well as prizes for competitors, whose contests drew spectators. Prizes for a target-shooting contest could be cash, a side of beef, a gold watch, furniture, or even a house. Taverns also sponsored cockfights and bull- and bear-baiting contests.

The masses engaged in tavern sports as a catharsis, as a means to win valuable prizes and gain respect and peer recognition, and as a vehicle for forming an independent community. Members of respectable society generally frowned on the plebeian tavern goers and their raucous public pastimes, yet often engaged in the same pastimes in more private settings.

By the 1720s, Philadelphians were unimpeded in their enjoyment of billiards, bowling, animal baiting, and cockfighting. Tavern culture flourished as the Quaker influence declined and as the city became more heterogeneous with the arrival of Palatine German and Scots-Irish immigrants, a growing gap in wealth between rich and
population, mainly merchants, possessed 63 percent of the taxable wealth in 1771. These high-status men had the time, discretionary income, and desire to participate in a leisurely lifestyle that provided a means of conspicuously displaying their achievements or inherited status. The gayest social life during the colonial era was to be had in cosmopolitan New York, which had originated as a Dutch community before it became a British royal colony led by men who identified with an aristocratic culture, and where religious scruples were less inhibiting than in other cities. Royal governors consistently sponsored and encouraged sports in emulation of English society. New York’s sophisticated upper class enjoyed many pleasures that were available only in a big city, such as joining social clubs and attending the theater, but they also enjoyed many rural sports—still accessible because of the small size of the colonial city—such as horse racing, hunting, and sleighing, as well as the more elite sports of coaching (racing carriages) and yachting.

A new sport of the period was cricket. In 1751, Americans and Londoners participated in a cricket match that marked the first international sporting event in North America—to the surprise of many, the colonials won. Golf also was introduced to America at this time. Before the Revolutionary War, Andrew Johnson of Charles Town, South Carolina, brought home golf clubs from Scotland, although he did not play until after the war. In 1786, Scottish merchants formed a golf society in South Carolina.

Meanwhile, hunting remained a sporting activity for the elite, rather than a way to put meat on the table or to bag skins for sale. The sport was so popular on Long Island that overhunting resulted in a scarcity of game. New York responded in 1706 by creating a closed hunting season from April through October. A generation later, conservation-minded Governor William Cosby helped establish game preserves and deer parks to protect wildlife.

Military leaders represented an important segment of the upper class. During the revolutionary era, British officers enjoyed their sporting pleasures. Officers stationed in New York played cricket, went fox hunting, and visited Thomas McMullan’s tavern, the Sign of George III, to witness bull baiting, which they often followed up with a British-style roast beef dinner.

Elite Men’s Clubs

Upper-class urbanites formed voluntary associations to promote sociability and to maintain ethnic and class
distinctions, often by establishing private clubs. The most exclusive of these in Philadelphia was the Schuylkill Fishing Company of Pennsylvania (originally known as the Colony in Schuylkill) founded in 1732, possibly the first men's club in the English-speaking world, which fostered conviviality among gentlemen who enjoyed fishing, hunting, and dining. The club was a role model for subsequent colonial sports clubs, including four other fishing companies, which were created by 1767. Many members of the club also were patriots who, in November 1774, organized the Philadelphia Light Horse Troop, the oldest continuous military organization in the United States.

Upper-class Philadelphians further emulated the English gentry by engaging in fox hunting beginning in the 1730s. The sport provided excitement, romance, and a focal point for camaraderie. Fox hunting was an expensive undertaking—which assured its exclusivity—requiring extensive planning and organization, professional guides, and trained hounds. Again, such hunting by the elite was very different from the hunting of common folk, which often was a means to obtain food to eat or hides to sell.

The first organized formal fox hunt was held in 1747 in Virginia by Lord Thomas Fairfax. Nineteen years later, elite Philadelphians established the Gloucester Fox Hunting Club, probably the first of its kind in the world.

Horse Racing

Horse racing, the most popular sport of the English gentry, was equally popular in the colonies. Virginians still dominated with 12 tracks in 1700 and 24 in 1730. Shortly thereafter, racing underwent a big change as colonists began emulating the English style of long-distance racing instead of quarter-mile horse racing. In addition, the riders were no longer horse owners but slaves. The change in racing fashion led in the 1740s to the importing of expensive Arabian horses from England, bred for size, strength, and endurance.

Long-distance racing also became popular at urban racetracks established by voluntary elite organizations, known as jockey clubs, to promote the sport. The first organized races around a circular track were staged in New York's Bowery district in April 1735. The New York area had seven courses by the 1760s, most notably the Newmarket track, where the finest horses—owned by elite families such as the Morrices, DeLanceys, and other members of the mercantile and landed elite—competed in high-stakes races.

The main Southern tracks were located in the colonial capitals of Annapolis (Maryland), Charles Town (later Charleston, South Carolina), and Williamsburg (Virginia). In 1734, Charles Town's first jockey club was formed; it raced at the York Course, which opened one year later. The York Course was the colony's main venue until the mid-1750s, but it was supplanted in 1760 by the Newmarket Course. Williamsburg opened a circular track for mile races in 1739, and six years later, the Annapolis elite formed their own jockey club. These races were well publicized in press advertisements and tavern broadsides. By the 1760s, the local press regularly published detailed postrace accounts. At times, gambling was so heavy that it threatened some family fortunes.

The races became a staple of the social calendar during public times, when weeklong meets were scheduled. All members of the community, including the esteemed military hero George Washington, attended the races, though there was little intermingling among the classes at the track. Afterward, the masses visited their favorite taverns to discuss the matches or entertained themselves with cudgeling contests, foot races, or chasing greased pigs, while the elite retired to the theater and to lavish balls. The Revolutionary War had a negative impact on the turf. In Philadelphia, radicals in the Provincial Assembly passed a bill in 1774 to discourage racing and other gambling sports in an effort to impose a more sober and patriotic value system on the community. A similar resolution was passed one month later by the Continental Congress as a statement against aristocratic social pretensions associated with England.

When the war broke out, elite loyalists continued to enjoy their exclusive pleasures, confirming for many patriots that the colonial upper class lacked republican virtue. When the Continental Congress returned to Philadelphia in 1778, a new resolution was approved encouraging each colony to suppress racing “and such other diversions as are productive of idleness and dissipation.” Pennsylvania promptly banned Sunday activities and all gambling sports.

Women and Sports

Conventional wisdom has held that women were not interested in sports during the colonial era, but historian Nancy Struna has found evidence of women's participation in sports in that period. She attributes this involvement to the increase in family stability and decline in death rates, widespread access to sporting goods and horses, and a growing positive orientation to the human body among enlightened figures such as Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, who supported exercise and
bodily development for both sexes. Adams argued that exercise made people happier, more satisfied, and ready for business and pleasure, and he recommended that his family attend to their own physical development.

By the 1720s, New England women were increasingly riding horses in saddle or in a chaise (a two- or four-wheeled carriage), and, by the 1740s, girls participated in running and horse races at local fairs. At mid-century, women were more commonly seen in public participating in such coeducational activities as fishing parties, sleigh rides, and sailing. Rich Southern women hunted foxes and raced horses. They also attended horse races, where they were welcomed by jockey clubs for the moral tone they set; the clubs initiated ladies’ purses and designated seating areas for them.

In eastern Massachusetts, women in the 1760s transformed the work of spinning into a competition between teams divided by age, marital status, or location. Struna identifies this as the first feminine-defined sport form. Such contests represented attempts by women to establish their autonomy from men, although their very nature reinforced the traditional woman’s sphere of domesticity and work inside the home.

Finally, well-to-do women enjoyed access to their husband’s billiard tables, fowling pieces, and sleighs. By 1790, married or widowed women owned about 5 percent of inventoried sporting equipment in Boston and 11 percent in Baltimore.

**Legacy**

Sporting life in the colonial era set the stage for the activities that followed in the young republic. Sports were mainly male, participatory, and rural based; however, they generally were organized by publicans for the masses and by elite urban clubs for the rich. Sports were most appreciated in the South for providing a public display of manliness. They were least regarded in New England, where conservative religious and social values associated most sports with gambling, drinking, and other “vile” activities.

Steven A. Riess

**Further Reading**


American sports underwent a significant transformation between 1790 and 1870. During these 80 years, sports were at first dominated by participatory pastimes rather than mass spectator sports. There was a lively male sporting subculture on the frontier that emphasized traditional pastimes such as hunting, fishing, fighting, and horse racing, and another in cities that was dominated by a sporting brotherhood of wealthy young men and athletic urban workers. The sporting life was a focal point of the bachelor subculture that dominated urban sports such as billiards, bowling, horse racing, and prizefighting, all of which were both participatory and spectatorial. The lifestyles of these two classes of men were abhorred by members of the "respectable" middle class, who saw nothing uplifting in a sporting life that glorified violence and gambling.

Beginning in the early republic period, however, a dramatic change took place in middle-class attitudes toward sport. A positive sports creed gradually developed, which held that participation in clean sports could improve the morality, character, and health of young people in dirty, crime- and vice-ridden cities. This change was encouraged by the positive example of immigrant sporting cultures and by the development of the new game of baseball, which seemed to epitomize the best attributes of sport.

Sports in the Early Republic

In 1800, 95 percent of the American population lived in rural areas and participated in sports that reflected their environment. Their principal sports involved contests of strength, skill, and courage staged in taverns or the nearby countryside. They fished, hunted, shot at targets, and rode horses, while spectators watched horse races and such blood sports as gouging, wrestling, and cockfighting.

The sporting culture in the Early Republic remained similar to that of the colonial era, in that it emulated the sports of Great Britain, the dominant sporting nation in Europe, and the main source of American culture. Horse racing was the main sport, but there was strong public opposition to horse racing in the Northeast, where it was derided as a reflection of the decadence of old loyalists during the Revolutionary War, encouraging lazy behavior on the part of spectators and sinful gambling. Thoroughbred racing, however, remained popular in the South, where there were formal tracks run by elite jockey clubs, and in the territories west of the Appalachian Mountains. In Lexington, Kentucky, the streets were converted into racetracks.

On the frontier, sporting life reflected the martial tradition of the region's many Scots-Irish inhabitants, the dangerous environment, and the lack of law and order. Young frontiersmen enjoyed wrestling, marksman ship contests, and the occasional festival at which they ran, jumped, and threw axes. Sport was enjoyed at Western military outposts such as Fort Dearborn (present-day Chicago), where soldiers, French Canadians, and Native Americans competed in hunting and running races.

The most violent frontier sport was the brutal, "rough and tumble" activity of gouging, a form of wrestling and fighting in which the only rule was that there were no rules. Such matches usually resulted from personal insults among poor backcountry folk or mountain men who possessed nothing but their honor, and they fought to defend that honor.

Sports in the Antebellum City

Less than 10 percent of the population lived in cities as late as 1820. Urban areas were physically small places, known as walking cities, because they were only a few miles in size, and people walked from place to place. They were located close to waterways and forests, and there often was sufficient vacant space in town or nearby for people to engage in rural sports. By 1860, 20 percent of Americans lived in cities, where growing populations provided both potential athletes and spectators.
Young men drawn to the cities for jobs and pleasure had ample opportunities to engage in unsupervised activities and to live free from the social controls that regulated small-town life. Indeed, cities had large numbers of single men—more than 40 percent in New Orleans, for example. They made up a bachelor subculture that reveled in drinking, whoring, gambling, and sports—a preferable alternative to the dominant Victorian culture, which emphasized hard work, deferred gratification, accumulation of property, and domesticity. To these bachelors, manliness meant aggressiveness, courage, honor, strength, virility, and violence.

This subculture mainly comprised journeymen, apprentices, semiskilled and unskilled men, and members of urban street gangs and volunteer fire companies who were heavily involved in machine politics. These men had little control over their work, and instead turned to their leisure activities for fulfillment, identity, a sense of manliness, and fun. They represented the core of a pre-industrial sporting fraternity that centered on plebeian billiard halls, firehouses, gambling halls, and especially taverns.

In these establishments, spectators could watch and bet on such blood sports as cockfighting and animal baiting, activities that reformers worked to halt in the 1830s and 1840s. Another option was pugilism, a step up from knife fights or gouging, as a demonstration of courage and manliness, but it was universally illegal. Matches were held secretly in saloon backrooms or well out of town.

Technological Innovation and the Growth of Sports

The United States in the antebellum era underwent a revolution in communication that made sporting news
more accessible, which, in turn, enhanced public interest in physical culture. Entrepreneurs created weeklies that focused on such rural sports as angling, hunting, and horse racing, beginning with John Stuart Skinner's *American Farmer*, established in 1819. It was followed 12 years later by William T. Porter's *The Spirit of the Times: A Chronicle of the Turf, Agriculture, Field Sports, Literature and the Stage*, which became the leading sporting periodical in the United States. *The Spirit of the Times* originally focused on horse and foot racing, fishing, and rowing, and later expanded its coverage to baseball, cricket, pugilism, and yachting.

There also were major developments in the daily newspapers, which before the 1830s were expensive and focused on business and politics. Mass-oriented penny newspapers such as the New York *Sun* and the *New York Herald* gave considerable coverage to horse racing and boxing. This, in turn, helped generate and sustain popular interest in sport. James G. Bennett's *New York Herald*, begun in 1835, became America's most popular newspaper by the Civil War, in large part because of its emphasis on sports. Bennett was particularly adept at employing the latest technology, such as telegraphy, which dramatically sped up reportage from distant places, and the rotary press (1846), which printed 20,000 sheets per hour.

There also was a great transportation revolution. Railroads began to have an impact on sport by the 1850s, helping participants and spectators travel to events. The railroad's potential to bolster interest in athletics was demonstrated in 1852, when the Boston, Concord, & Montreal Railroad sponsored the Harvard–Yale rowing race at Lake Winnipesaukee, New Hampshire, to encourage ridership.

### Sports and Social Class

Social class was one of the prime determinants of the sporting interests of antebellum Americans, as different levels of income and family backgrounds often dictated the types of sports that people participated in and watched as spectators. Upper-class young men had the most money and time to engage in sports. They typically joined sports clubs that enhanced their social status, as in the colonial era, and occasionally sponsored public contests.

Wealthy financier John C. Stevens of New York was the preeminent antebellum sportsman, involved in horse racing, pedestrianism, and yachting. He was the leading Northern horseman, and in 1823, he organized the Great Match Race between the Northern stallion Eclipse (also known as American Eclipse) and the top Southern horse, Sir Henry, at Long Island's Union Course. Reportedly, more than 50,000 people saw Eclipse capture two out of three 4-mile (6.4-kilometer) heats for the victory. Twelve years later, Stevens promoted the first major pedestrian race by offering $1,000 to any man who could run 10 miles (16 kilometers) in under an hour. The race was won by Connecticut farmer Henry Stannard, who came in just 12 seconds under an hour.

In 1844, Stevens organized the New York Yacht Club to promote upper-class leisure, sociability, and good health, as well as American naval architecture. Seven years later, his *America* won the Royal Yacht Squadron regatta. This victory over the British, considered the greatest sailors and ship builders in the world, was the first by American athletes over the mother country, and a moment of great national pride. The winning trophy became known as the America's Cup. Thereafter, the New York Yacht Club became the nation's preeminent athletic organization and one of New York's most prestigious men's clubs.

The antebellum middle class was composed of white Protestant shopkeepers, clerks, professionals, prosperous farm owners, and highly skilled workmen, who demonstrated their manliness through hard work, making the home the center of their lives, and maintaining Victorian standards of behavior. They disdained the lower-class sporting fraternity for turning the middle-class value system upside down with their urban counter-culture, which denigrated hard work and glorified violence. Clergymen, journalists, physicians, and other middle-class social reformers condemned baiting sports, cockfighting, and boxing as time-wasting, immoral, cruel, and debilitating sports that undermined the social order, bringing together crowds of unruly and often drunken young men. State and local governments influenced by such reformers often passed laws against such activities.

The first sport identified with the middle class was harness racing, which gained popularity in the 1820s. Even though it usually involved gambling, by the 1850s, harness racing was the most popular spectator sport in the country. Trotting, as it also was called, was an exciting sport that gave owners a chance to show off their horses and demonstrate their prowess as drivers. Trotting originally was an urban sport centered in New York City, the Northern hub of the horse breeding and training industry. It was the first modern sport, organized in 1825 when the New York Trotting Association was formed to schedule meets on a semiannual
basis at a racecourse, replacing the customary spontaneous races, known as brushes, on city streets.

Trotting was considered a more democratic sport than aristocratic horse racing, because it employed inexpensive standardbred horses, often used for transporting freight or passengers in wagons, instead of costly thoroughbreds, whose only use was for racing and breeding. However, by mid-century, members of the nouveaux riches, notably Cornelius Vanderbilt, head of the New York Central Railroad, and newspaper publisher Robert Bonner, got into the sport and bought up the best trotters.

Some of the most prominent antebellum sportsmen were members of the working class (wage workers), particularly well-paid artisans and food tradesmen, especially butchers, who were renowned for their strength. These traditionally minded men wanted to maintain customary values such as respect for physicality. They represented an oppositional culture to that of the middle class and were an integral segment of the bachelor subculture, even though they usually earned enough money to indulge themselves in sports, ranging from illegal blood and gambling contests to baseball. Working-class athletes often gravitated to sports in which money could be made, such as pedestrian races by the mid-1830s and the Scottish American Caledonian Games of the 1850s.

**Old Immigrants**

Some of the most important antebellum working-class athletes were immigrants from Western and Central Europe, including people from the British Isles and the German-speaking nations.

British immigrants, who typically were artisans, brought with them the most vigorous sporting tradition in the Western world and formed ethnic sports clubs such as the many Albion societies they established wherever they settled. Skilled textile workers brought cricket with them to Lawrence and Lowell, Massachusetts, and to Philadelphia, while English merchants and professionals established cricketing “XIs” (so called because teams were made up of 11 players) in Boston, Brooklyn, and New York City. The most famous cricket team was that of the New York’s St. George’s Cricket Club, organized in 1840, which played the first international match against a Toronto team four years later in Hoboken, New Jersey. The game became popular in the United States, and at mid-century, cricket was the leading American ball sport.

America also attracted professional English boxers and pedestrians. One-fifth of New York City’s boxers were English immigrants, including “Young Barney” Aaron, who became the American lightweight champion in 1857. English runners competed in long-distance races at Hoboken, New Jersey’s Beacon Race Course, which reputedly drew up to 30,000 spectators for a single event.

Beginning in Boston in 1853, Scottish immigrants founded Caledonian societies, which provided them with a sense of community. Eventually, there were more than 100 such clubs, which sponsored athletic meets awarding monetary prizes to winners. Their contests emphasized traditional Scottish activities such as throwing the caber and pitching the heavy stone, along with sprint races and field events such as the hammer throw, shot put, and pole vault. Caledonian competitions dominated American track and field until the 1870s, with some events drawing paying crowds that surpassed 20,000.

The British migrants were surpassed by the 1.7 million unskilled and uneducated Irish who came to the United States during and after the potato famine of 1845–1846. They settled in urban slums and brought with them a male bachelor subculture that helped them fit into the underground American sports culture.

Irish immigrants mostly took part in American sports, particularly boxing, which they quickly dominated. Indeed, some 70 percent of New York’s pugilists during this era were Irish or Irish Americans seeking to escape poverty. Because boxing was illegal, there were few formal matches. Boxers often depended on political sponsors for patronage jobs that required physical prowess, such as “shoulder hitters” (political intimidators). These boxers often were members of street gangs or fire companies closely tied to Tammany Hall, New York’s Democratic political machine. They fought for side bets and to protect personal honor, ethnic pride, and the Democratic Party against English immigrants or native white Americans tied to the Whig or Know Nothing parties.

The most renowned Irish American boxer was John Morrissey, the American champion from 1853 to 1858, who, unlike his peers, became a wealthy man as New York City’s most successful gambling hall proprietor; Morrissey would go on to help revitalize the sport of horse racing in the North during the Civil War, and he become a U.S. congressman.

In the mid-1850s, Germans replaced the Irish as the largest immigrant group, but they were quicker to succeed in American society, as about half were
farmers and the rest were skilled and literate workmen. They brought their culture with them, including Turnverein, or gymnastic societies, begun in 1811 by Friedrich Jahn to promote German nationalism and physical fitness in preparation for future wars with France. Members of these societies, known as Turners, first arrived in America in the 1820s and taught college students gymnastics. In 1848, German political refugees brought the movement to the United States and established clubs in Louisville, Kentucky; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Newark, New Jersey, and then throughout all German communities in America. The clubs were open to all Germans and became community centers that promoted gymnastics, German culture, working-class interests, and liberal (mainly Republican) politics.

Making a New Sporting Culture

The American sporting culture underwent a dramatic change around the mid-nineteenth century, setting the stage for a sporting boom after the Civil War. Many factors contributed to this, including urbanization, industrialization, the revolution in transportation and communication, the example of English, Scottish, and German athletes, the development of new sports, the rise of broader social reforms, especially those concerned with public health and law and order, and the creation of a positive sports creed that promoted physical culture as a force for improving the American people.

Urban Reform and the Ideology of Sports

During the Jacksonian era of the 1830s and early 1840s, a new sports creed emerged that promoted athletic activity as a useful recreation with many social benefits, including character building, improving morality, and promoting public health for urbanites. This belief derived from several sources, including ancient Greek culture, which stressed the union of fitness and education; the rhetoric of eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers, who argued that man had the potential to improve himself by the dint of his own efforts; and the ideas of early nineteenth-century European educators, who emphasized physical activity in school. This led to the rise of a fitness movement that advocated physical activity and a sound diet, as well as a municipal park movement that sought to secure public space for outdoor recreation in fresh air, especially for the “toiling masses.”

All of this occurred at a time when reformers were securing universal white male suffrage, encouraging more economic opportunity for the working class, and pushing for essential public services in growing cities, such as sanitation, compulsory education, and police protection. The impetus came from the Second Great Awakening, a rebirth of religious fervor and social awareness among evangelical Protestants, as well as from secular-minded physicians, journalists, statisticians, and other educated people who wanted to alleviate pressing social ills. These problems were largely the products of urbanization, including growing class divisions attributable to extremes of poverty and wealth, increased social conflict among people of different backgrounds and cultures resulting from mass immigration, the breakdown of law and order among transient urban populations, and poor public health, especially in overcrowded slums with inadequate sanitation and polluted water, that resulted in epidemics and high mortality rates.

The leading proponents of the new sports creed included liberal Unitarian clergymen such as the Reverend William Ellery Channing of Boston; scientists such as statistician Lemuel Shattuck, the founder of vital record keeping; journalists such as William Cullen Bryant of the New York Evening Post; physicians such as Bronson Alcott; and health faddists such as Sylvester Graham, inventor of the Graham cracker. They criticized urban men as unhealthy and unproductive, reserving special censure for sedentary middle-class office workers.

The antidote, these reformers believed, was clean, fresh-air sports and sound diets that would give urbanites a healthier lifestyle and the moral values of the yeoman farmer. In his essay “Autocrat of the Breakfast Table” in the Atlantic Monthly (1858), Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., chastised the American bourgeois lifestyle in comparison to the robust life of the English gentry: “Such a set of black-coated, stiff-jointed, soft-muscled, paste-complexioned youth as we can boast in our Atlantic cities never before sprang from loins of Anglo-Saxon lineage.”

Catharine Beecher was a leading advocate of domesticity for women, but she also promoted women’s fitness through sports, considered an entirely a male sphere at the time. In her Course of Calisthenics for Young Ladies (1832), she argued that women needed to be fit in order to combat chronic frailty; to prevent frequent illnesses such as nervousness, indigestion, palpitations, and headaches; and to prepare themselves for motherhood. Women were urged to ride horses, dance, and do calisthenics to enhance their femininity, beauty, and grace.
Besides improving health, the sports creed asserted that physical culture would benefit society by promoting traditional American values, such as hard work and self-discipline, develop higher standards of character, and provide a substitute for vile slum amusements, thereby protecting communities from criminality and immorality. Reformers such as Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale urged a rational recreation movement consisting of wholesome and uplifting fun. They recognized that lower-class urbanites had a great need for leisure activities but were spending their time at diversions that hardened men’s souls to brutality and offered instant gratification through gambling. Hale preferred that these men enjoy traditional rustic pleasures, such as fishing or hunting. Because those pastimes often were difficult for urban men to participate in, he encouraged such moral entertainments as legitimate theater, classical music, and physical culture.

Muscular Christianity

Hale became a leading advocate of “muscular Christianity,” a mid-nineteenth-century English philosophy that advocated the practice of clean sport and physical culture to develop moral, devout, and physically fit men, thereby enhancing their mental, physical, and spiritual dimensions. Muscular Christians viewed sport as a way to promote manliness, check effeminacy, and provide an alternative to sexual expenditures of energy. Muscular Christians believed that religion and physical vigor, rather than being opposed to each other, went hand in hand. The philosophy was popularized by Thomas Hughes in his best seller Tom Brown’s School Days (1857), a fictional account of Rugby, an English preparatory school that emphasized the use of athletics to build character.

Muscular Christianity provided the intellectual underpinnings for the growth of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), an evangelical organization founded in London in 1844, which, in turn, became muscular Christianity’s main institutional supporter. The YMCA came to America seven years later to help rural youth moving to cities adjust to urban life. By the 1860s, the organization was using moral athletics and gymnastics as an engaging alternative to vile amusements for young white-collar men. The YMCA sought to develop honorable Christian gentlemen who exercised self-control, abstained from sex outside of marriage, and used their strength to protect others, and the association promoted its philosophy that a strong mind, sound spirit, and healthy body worked hand in hand.

The positive sports creed struck a chord with the middle class, who became convinced of the power of sports to improve morality, character, and health. They also admired non-Irish immigrants as models of uplifting sports and turned to exciting team games, especially baseball, that were perceived as avenues for ameliorating the lives of participants and spectators.

Municipal Park Movement

As urban populations rose and land-use patterns in the walking city began to shift, traditional playing areas often were destroyed, and there were few public spaces where athletes could play. Empty lots that once had served as cricket pitches were developed for housing or factories. Nearby fields and streams became inaccessible as they were drained and cleared, requiring sportsmen to travel farther to reach wooded areas and unpolluted waterways. By the 1850s, New York’s old cricket sites had been built up, and the roads formerly used for trotting horses were no longer available. New Yorkers, such as the Knickerbockers cricket team, increasingly relied on playing fields out of town in Brooklyn and in Hoboken, New Jersey.

One answer to the space problem was offered by the municipal park movement, which originated in overcrowded New York during the 1840s, led by journalist and poet William Cullen Bryant and landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing. The movement was supported by a broad-based coalition of social reformers, physicians, labor leaders, businessmen, and professional politicians who wanted the city government to construct a public park. Their aim was to improve public health by providing access to fresh air and foster order by providing a venue for social classes to mingle and the lower classes to learn from their betters. They also believed that parks would aid the local economy by providing jobs, boost the city’s public image, and raise property values on adjacent land. The project appealed to the Tammany Hall machine that controlled the city government because of the prospect of new construction contracts and patronage jobs.

The 843-acre (341-hectare) Central Park was built between 1858 and 1873 on the outskirts of town, where land was cheaper. The board of trustees held an open competition for the park’s design, which required a wooded area, a formal English garden, and a parade ground for cricket. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux won the contract. The cricket field never was built, however, because Olmsted believed the park should be reserved for receptive recreation—pleasure derived
from enjoying beautiful scenery—not active recreation that would destroy the grass.

Initially, Central Park was considered an “elite park” because of Olmsted’s recreational philosophy and because its location was more accessible to wealthy owners of horses and carriages than to the working classes, who had to walk far uptown to get there. The completion of Central Park nevertheless demonstrated how an independent government agency could administer development projects and encouraged municipalities to get involved in urban planning. Central Park became the model for the many large suburban parks built after the Civil War by Olmsted, the nation’s pre-eminent landscape architect, in Boston, Brooklyn, Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco.

**College Sports**

Important sites for sports among the sons of the upper and upper-middle classes were Eastern colleges, where young men pursued boxing, fencing, football, handball, horseback riding, quoits (a game similar to horseshoes), running, and swimming. Interclass contests dated to the 1820s and 1830s. The games promoted class loyalty and served as a venue for initiation rites. The faculty and administration did not endorse such activities, but they preferred participation in sports to other rowdy youthful behavior.

The first intercollegiate sport was crew, popularized by professional boatmen, upper-middle-class rowing clubs, and the annual Oxford–Cambridge race in England, which began in 1829. Fifteen year later, a four-man team of seniors from Yale University raced lowerclassmen in the initial college rowing contest; this was followed in 1852 by the first intercollegiate race, a contest in which Harvard University beat Yale. There were just a few races thereafter, until students from four Eastern schools established the College Union Regatta in 1858, a contest that drew 15,000 to its inaugural race a year later.

In 1869, Harvard was invited to send its eight-man crew to a 2-mile (3.2-kilometer) race against England’s Oxford University. Harvard lost by only six seconds—an achievement that was seen as evidence of America’s advances in culture, manliness, and athletic prowess. The race helped increase interest in crew and led to the formation of the Rowing Association of American Colleges in 1871.

The second major intercollegiate sport was baseball. The first collegiate contest in 1859 was played under the “Massachusetts rules,” which allowed for a more

wide-open ball game than modern baseball. In that match, Amherst College defeated Williams College, 65–32. Baseball took off as a college game after the Civil War. Harvard’s nine, organized in 1865, was the top college squad. In 1870, the team made a 44-game Western tour, playing amateurs and professionals and winning two-thirds of their games against the pros. Through the 1870s, baseball was the principal game on campus.

**Baseball**

The new game of baseball, which started out as a children’s game, fit well with the emerging antebellum sports creed. The modern game was developed by Alexander Cartwright and his teammates on the New York Knickerbocker Base Ball Club in 1845. It was both an

*Alexander Cartwright, a New York City bookstore owner and volunteer fireman, drafted the first rules of the modern game of baseball in 1845. He also established the first organized team, the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club, and set the dimensions of the field. (Associated Press)*
athletic and a social organization of white-collar workers who took the game seriously and expected players to be disciplined, trained, and well drilled.

A baseball fraternity soon emerged, with dozens of clubs in the early 1850s composed mainly of young artisans, clerks, and small businessmen who shared the same Victorian work and leisure ethic and internalized the positive values of the new sports creed, such as self-control and cooperation. Few players were drawn from the lower classes.

Players looked to baseball as uplifting fun and a chance to display their athletic skills and form friendships. The game was considered less manly than cricket, whose batsmen needed bravery to stand up against hard-throwing bowlers and required balls to be caught on the fly, not on a bounce, as in early baseball. Soon, however, cricket was surpassed by baseball, which was easier to play, did not require a perfect playing field, did not take all day to play, and had American origins, a fact that appealed to patriotic sentiment.

The early ballplayers, who at first were located mainly in New York, Brooklyn, and the surrounding metropolitan area, played on clubs organized by occupation, ethnicity, or neighborhood. One of the first teams was the Brooklyn Eckfords, which consisted mainly of prosperous shipwrights and mechanics. The best working-class nine was the Brooklyn Atlantics, composed of Irish Catholic food industry employees with strong ties to the Democratic Party. In 1860, the Atlantics played a series against the middle-class Brooklyn Excelsiors, drawing enormous interest, because they represented opposing ethnic, political, and socioeconomic groups.

The fraternal aspect of baseball soon gave way to "playing for keeps," and a championship series emerged in metropolitan New York during the Civil War. Baseball quickly became commercialized as entrepreneurs took advantage of the public's growing willingness to pay for entertainment. Tickets first were sold for an 1858 all-star series between New York and Brooklyn, with the revenue used to defray expenses. Four years later, William Cammeyer made the game a business by enclosing his skating rink in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, renaming it the Union Grounds, and charging spectators 10 cents to watch baseball teams play.

The quest for victory led to the recruitment and payment of top players, a development that was opposed by the National Association of Base Ball Players, founded in 1857. The association considered professionalization unfair to amateurs, who did not devote themselves full time to sport. In 1860, pitcher James Creighton of the Brooklyn Excelsiors was paid under the table, making him the first professional baseball player.

Baseball boomed in the aftermath of the Civil War, partly as a result of the increased national exposure it had received in army camps. There were more than 2,000 organized clubs by 1869, mostly in the Northeast, including 13 professional teams that played more than 50 games a year. The first openly all-salaried nine was the Cincinnati Red Stockings of 1869, organized by local boosters to promote their city.

Steven A. Riess

Further Reading


Organized sports emerged on a popular scale in American cities before the Civil War, a result of immigrants bringing their sporting culture with them, changing attitudes among the middle class regarding the moral uplift provided by athletics, the rise of the municipal park movement, and the emergence of wholesome outdoor sports, most notably baseball. However, a real boom in sports took place after the Civil War, when organized sports emerged on a major scale. Sports became modernized in the period between the end of the Civil War and the end of the nineteenth century—the so-called Gilded Age—as new games were created, athletic stars became national heroes, and American sports, such as baseball, were exported across the globe as symbols of progress and freedom.

The rise of sport also was tied to developments in the broader society, particularly the quickening pace of urbanization and the growth of industrial capitalism. Cities provided sites for the sports boom, because they had the critical number of participants to play sports and sufficient spectators to make commercial sports profitable. Industrial capitalism influenced sports by reshaping the social structure, producing important technological innovations, and making possible the mass production of sporting goods in factories.

**Technological Revolution and the Rise of Sports**

The sports boom was facilitated by daily press coverage in new penny newspapers. Papers received instant reports of distant events by telegraphy (invented in 1842) and telephony (1876), as did poolrooms and saloons, which also served as illegal off-track betting parlors, facilitating wagering. In 1896, Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World established the first sports department and the first distinctive sports page. Daily coverage was reinforced by weekly general-interest magazines and specialized periodicals such as Wilkes' *Spirit of the Times* (established in 1859 as the successor to William T. Porter’s earlier *Spirit of the Times*, a title publisher George Wilkes turned back to in 1868), which was renowned for its coverage of the turf and track and field, and Richard Kyle Fox’s *National Police Gazette* (1845), which emphasized boxing. Meanwhile, baseball was the focus of *Sporting Life* (1883) and the *Sporting News* (1886).

Cheap mass transit boomed, advancing from horse-drawn streetcars to electrified trolleys, and even the first subway in Boston (1896), all of which made it easier for fans to get to sporting events, which often were sponsored by traction, or streetcar, firms. Traction companies even backed professional baseball leagues, including the New England Trolley League (1899). Intercity railroads shortened travel time for teams, making long-distance travel possible. In 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stockings, the first fully professional team, used trains to make a national tour, traveling from San Francisco to Boston.

Industrialization also facilitated the mass production of inexpensive sporting goods, including bats, gloves, and 5-cent baseballs, in factories owned by vertically integrated companies that controlled all stages of production, from raw materials to production to selling, such as A.G. Spalding & Brothers. The Spalding firm was also horizontally integrated, having bought up several other sporting goods companies.

Several new inventions were utilized for sporting needs, such as stopwatches to record race times and cameras to help determine the winners of close horse races. Illumination at indoor arenas was improved by using arc lighting and, later, Thomas Edison’s incandescent lightbulb (1879). In 1897, Edison’s new kinetoscope, the first practical motion picture, was used to film the James J. Corbett—Bob Fitzsimmons heavyweight championship fight.

New products also were invented specifically for sporting use. Crew was enhanced by the use of sliding seats (1870s) in racing shells, while streamlined horse racing sulkies with pneumatic tires (1888) cut the mile record by five seconds. Baseball was improved by
the introduction of the catcher’s mask and chest protector, and by vulcanized rubber, which made balls more elastic and resilient.

The bicycle was a major technological innovation, beginning with Pierre Lallement’s velocipede, known as the “boneshaker,” in 1866, which led to a brief bicycling fad. This model was supplanted in 1876 by the difficult-to-ride high wheeler (also known as an “ordinary” or “penny farthing”). It had a huge front wheel and a tiny rear wheel, which increased speed. In the late 1880s came the English safety bicycle, which was lighter in weight, easier to ride, and featured matched pneumatic tires and efficient coaster brakes. A new cycling fad emerged, and by the mid-1890s, there were 4 million cyclists in America.

Cycling became especially popular among women. The sport provided a socially acceptable form of exercise and independent travel, and it justified the wearing of less restrictive sports clothes, signifying women’s growing liberation from the constraints of the Victorian era.

The bicycle era was short-lived, as many bicycles used for independent transportation were supplanted by automobiles powered by the internal combustion engine.

American manufacturers, many originally in the cycling business, tested the cars they built by racing them. In 1895, six cars contested the 53-mile (85-kilometer) round-trip race from Chicago’s South Side to Evanston, Illinois, won by manufacturer Charles Duryea.

**Sports and Public Space**

Traditional playing areas in the industrial city often were destroyed by urban growth. City governments responded to the dearth of open breathing spaces by establishing public parks on the outskirts of town, modeled after New York City’s 843-acre (341-hectare) Central Park.

Like Central Park, many such public spaces were designed as grand suburban parks, emphasizing receptive recreation—pleasure derived from enjoying beautiful scenery—rather than active games, which would harm the grass. However, by the 1880s, parks were reconfigured for more active middle-class use, with baseball fields and tennis courts. However, inner-city residents who most needed breathing spaces frequently had little access to distant parks.
Social Class

Industrial capitalism reshaped the urban social structure, creating unprecedented wealth for a small upper class, new opportunities for the growing middle class, and low-paying jobs for blue-collar workers, who made up the majority of the population. A person’s social class had a big influence on sporting options in the Gilded Age.

The Upper Class

The top 5 percent of the population, with 30 percent of the national wealth, had the time and money to amuse themselves as they pleased, especially with costly sports at exclusive clubs where they could conspicuously display their affluence. These sport clubs not only facilitated athletic competition, they also fostered the formation of a community of like-minded people who shared the same social backgrounds, beliefs, values, customs, and lifestyles. Membership in these voluntary associations, which included athletic (track and field), hunting, jockey, polo, yacht, and country clubs, was highly selective.

The New York Athletic Club, founded in 1866, was one of the most important upper-class sports organizations. It also was the nation’s preeminent track and field organization. The club sponsored the first national track and field championships in 1876 and set national standards for amateurism. It helped found the Amateur Athletic Union in 1888 to uphold strict amateur principles, barring anyone who pursued athletics as a career, had competed or coached athletes for money, or who had competed against professionals.

In 1882, proper Bostonians founded the Country Club in Brookline, Massachusetts. This prestigious suburban resort was modeled on the lifestyle of the English gentry, and members enjoyed exclusive sports, especially golf. Five years later, John Reed built St. Andrews, the first American golf course, in Yonkers, New York. Golf was very popular with older men, as it was not particularly strenuous. By 1900, there were about 1,000 golf courses in the country. Country club members also could play tennis, fish, hunt, ice-skate, ride sleighs, and socialize.

Upper-class young men preferred more vigorous sports through which they could prove their virility at a time when the upper classes feared that their culture and religion were being feminized, and when birthrates were declining. Playing football was seen as a moral equivalent of war, enabling participants to prove that they measured up to contemporary standards of masculinity. Future president Theodore Roosevelt exemplified an active lifestyle as a big-game hunter, boxer, cowboy, and “Rough Rider” in the Spanish-American War, and he wrote influential essays extolling the “strenuous life,” an idea that took hold at colleges and elite Eastern prep schools.

Elite women gained access to athletic clubs as both spectators and competitors at a time when most people still considered sports a manly sphere, inappropriate for young ladies. However, their high status gave them the confidence to contest conventional perceptions of femininity. Women whose husbands belonged to athletic clubs had time set aside for them to play billiards, bowl, fence, or swim. Golf was considered appropriate for women, because it was not strenuous; women could play during off-peak hours at a father’s or husband’s country club. In the 1890s, women formed their own golf organizations; they held their first national championship in 1895, one year after the men.

Women also were active in the new sport of lawn tennis, invented in 1873 by Englishman John Wingham and brought to America a year later by Mary Outerbridge, who laid out a court at the Staten Island Cricket and Baseball Club near New York City. Men played the game and organized the U.S. Lawn Tennis Association in 1881, but tennis was not considered a manly sport. Women enjoyed doubles matches and a sedate baseline game that did not require much strength or vigorous exertion, which was discouraged by their full-length skirts. The women’s national championship began in 1887.

Elite athletic sportswomen provided a model for the “Gibson girl” of the 1890s—attractive, slim, and physically fit young ladies who did not wear restrictive corsets and participated in coed cycling, golf, tennis, and horseback riding.

The Middle Class

Middle-class participation in sports also skyrocketed during this era. This demographic grew and changed significantly after the Civil War. Many members of the middle class were office workers and small businessmen in sedentary jobs. They saw participation in sports as a way to certify their manliness, which they no longer proved through physical work. They also had the discretionary time and money to enjoy themselves at sports that built character, health, and morality. They joined the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), whose philosophy was to build “muscular Christians”
by training the mind, body, and spirit. In addition, they organized or joined baseball, cycling, target-shooting, and track and field clubs to compete, make friends, and gain social status. They also were avid spectators, especially of baseball.

Middle-class Victorian women were expected to be physically inactive, because, it was believed, they were prone to physical, emotional, moral, and mental afflictions that could be exacerbated by athletic activity. Many people did not like the idea of women athletes, not only because they considered females unfit for vigorous physical activity, but also because they feared that such activities would make women too competitive and aggressive. Still, many physicians urged moderation for women, and women educators promoted physical culture, contending that exercise actually enhanced women’s health and attractiveness.

Appropriate activities included calisthenics, precision drills (Swedish gymnastics), and Dr. Diocletian Lewis’s system of rhythmic exercises, which employed rings, wands, and wooden dumbbells to promote flexibility, agility, and grace. By the 1860s, middle-class young women participated in coeducational recreational sports, such as croquet, horseback riding, ice-skating, sledding, and later cycling, golf, and tennis. Some women utilized the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), founded in 1858, which began sponsoring women’s sports in the 1880s.

Athletic college girls enjoyed some intercollegiate competition in sports such as basketball beginning in the 1890s, but there was strong opposition. Men were barred from viewing their games, and the rules were adapted to fit women’s presumed limited capacities.

The Working Class

Working-class sport was hindered by urbanization, industrialization, and a civilizing process that tried to eliminate traditional gambling and violent sports. Before industrialization, artisans exercised considerable control over the workplace and were prominent sportmen, with free time and resources to spend on recreation. They admired physicality and sought to maintain traditional masculine and working-class values. But the factory system and timework discipline led to the deskilling of workers (only 15 percent of factory workers were craftsmen), leaving them with little leisure time, low incomes, and living in crowded urban neighborhoods with few accessible sporting facilities. It was hard for them to go to baseball games because of work schedules, ticket prices, and the cost of travel, but they did live near saloons, where they could gamble, play billiards, throw darts, and watch boxing matches in backrooms.

Blue-collar sports got a boost from companies, political parties, ethnic organizations, and unions, all of whom sponsored picnic games that emphasized track and field contests. Winners received trophies and products—such as jewelry, furniture, and clothing—which could be pawned or sold for cash. The best working-class athletes were professionals, notably long-distance runners who raced in lucrative six-day events, such as the 1878–1879 International Astley Belt races for purses of up to $20,000. The winners routinely ran as far as 500 miles (805 kilometers) in a single event.

At first, businessmen believed that sports were a waste of time for workers, but in 1872, the railroads began supporting YMCA programs for their employees. A decade later, industrialists began setting up their own athletic programs as part of the new welfare capitalism intended to produce a contented, loyal, punctual, efficient, hardworking, and nonunion workforce and to attract new workers. Such sponsored athletic teams also served to advertise the company.

Ethnicity and Race

Ethnicity and race were critical factors in working-class sport. The old immigrants from Western Europe—notably the British and Germans—brought with them their athletic traditions. The Irish also brought a lively sporting tradition that was nationalistic, but also fit into the bachelor subculture that native middle-class people considered disreputable. In 1870, the secret revolutionary group Clan na Gael began sponsoring track and field meets to attract followers, and a decade later, the Gaelic Athletic Association reinvented the tradition of ancient Hibernian games such as hurling and Gaelic football.

However, the second generation of Irish Americans preferred mainstream sports, particularly prizefighting. Nine of 19 U.S. world pugilist champions in the 1890s were of Irish descent, most notably John L. Sullivan, the last bare-knuckle heavyweight champion, the idol of the shanty Irish, and the greatest sports hero of the century. The Irish also were active on the baseball diamond and were surpassed, in terms of numbers, only by native-born white Americans in professional baseball. In addition, the Irish became active in the business of sports as bookmakers, boxing promoters, and baseball team owners, which reflected the nexus of urban politics, illegal gambling, and sports, all areas in which the Irish figured prominently in the late nineteenth century.
The experience of new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, who arrived near the end of the century, was very different, as they came without a sporting legacy and disdained American sports as a waste of time. However, their sons often circumvented parental disapproval and played sports for fun, hoping to prove that they were not "greenhorns" (unassimilated newcomers) and to dispel negative stereotypes about their ethnic community.

These youth did well in sports that suited their inner-city environment, especially boxing, a useful skill for boys who often got into street fights. Their role models included fighters such as Joe Chojynski, the Jewish heavyweight who fought James J. Corbett three times. By contrast, these youth fared poorly in baseball, which required large fields that were not available in the inner city. Furthermore, many children of immigrants dropped out of school early and did not have the opportunity to play on high school teams.

The difference between old and new immigrants was reflected in the gap between German Jews, who arrived in the mid-nineteenth century, and Russian Jews, who came at the century's end. The former participated in mainstream American sports, producing some renowned track stars, football players, and sports entrepreneurs. In the 1880s, German Jews encountered growing anti-Semitism and could not get into many prestigious clubs, so they established their own athletic clubs and supported the Young Men's Hebrew Association, modeled after the YMCA. Philanthropic German Jews helped their coreligionists from Eastern Europe adapt to America and established settlement houses, such as the Educational Alliance (1893) on New York's Lower East Side, which offered civics classes, employment bureaus, as well as gymnasiums. German Jews believed that participating in sports would teach Russian Jewish boys American values and behavior, while at the same time countering negative stereotypes about Jewish manliness.

The African American sporting experience differed from that of European Americans. African Americans participated in many American sports in the antebellum South, as slaves or as free men, including boxing, cockfighting, and horse racing. However, after the Civil War, they faced extreme prejudice in sports, as the South, where 90 percent of blacks lived, was totally segregated, first by custom and later by law. African Americans relied on their own fraternal, church, political, and sporting groups to sponsor recreational and spectator sports, to promote a sense of community, and occasionally to gain recognition in white society through public or private contests with white teams.

Nevertheless, African Americans made notable achievements in sports. Marshall "Major" Taylor was the world champion sprint cyclist in 1899, and Isaac Murphy was a three-time (1884, 1890, and 1891) Kentucky Derby–winning jockey. There also were more than 70 blacks in organized baseball from 1878 to 1899. By the late 1890s, however, the only African Americans in professional baseball were members of all-black teams, notably the Acme Giants, who played in 1898 in the Iron and Oil League. Despite their ousting from professional baseball, blacks continued to play year-round with their own touring nine, most notably the Cuban Giants, established in 1885.

**Sports and Education**

A key development in sports during the industrial age was the blossoming of intercollegiate sports, based on the English model found at preparatory schools and Oxford and Cambridge universities. Sports gave college men a chance to demonstrate their manliness, and gave both men and women an opportunity to display their athletic prowess, organize their own extracurricular activities, and promote school spirit. Intercollegiate sports emerged first at elite Eastern institutions, whose student bodies belonged to the upper or upper-middle class, and then was emulated elsewhere, including at the more democratic state universities.

The first intercollegiate sporting event was a rowing race between Harvard and Yale universities in 1852, which inspired the establishment of the College Union Regatta in 1859. Intercollegiate baseball began with a game between Amherst and Williams colleges in 1859, and after the Civil War, baseball became the leading college sport. Harvard had the finest team, and in 1870, when its home games drew up to 10,000 spectators, its team took a 44-game Western tour. In 1879, the College Baseball Association was organized. However, its weak eligibility rules allowed some winning college teams to use professionals.

Track and field at American colleges was an outgrowth of the popularity of the Scottish American Caledonian Games, which began in the 1850s, and the Oxford–Cambridge competitions, first held in 1864. The first U.S. intercollegiate track and field meet was held in 1873, in conjunction with a college regatta in Saratoga, New York. Two years later, ten colleges established the Intercollegiate Association of Amateur Athletes of America to regulate track and field. Harvard
and Yale dominated, winning all team titles between 1880 and 1897. In 1896, five Princeton and Harvard undergraduates and five Harvard alumni represented the United States at the first modern Olympics in Athens, Greece, and won nine of 12 track and field events.

Baseball was supplanted by football as the “big game” in college athletics during the 1880s. The first intercollegiate football game was played in 1869, when Rutgers University beat Princeton University, 6–4, using rules similar to soccer. In 1876, Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, and Yale formalized common rules, and all but Yale joined to establish the Intercollegiate Football Association (IFA); Yale joined the organization in 1879. Led by volunteer coach Walter Camp, Yale’s team dominated the game, outscoring opponents 4,660–92 from 1883 to 1891. Camp proposed most of the major rule changes and tactical innovations during those years; he later would become known as the “Father of American Football.”

The IFA teams and others that soon developed were run by student associations without official support from their colleges. They created highly commercialized intercollegiate sports programs, recruiting athletes and professional coaches to win at all costs, and bringing in large crowds of paying spectators. Students found sports much more fun and more exciting than traditional extracurricular activities, and they also liked how sports promoted school spirit and publicized their institutions.

College athletics were even more important for women. Women physical educators, many of whom were trained by Bostonians Amy Morris Homans and Dudley Sargent, exercised significant control over their students, supervising mainly noncompetitive interclass athletic programs in basketball, rowing, and tennis at elite Eastern women’s colleges.

Opportunities to play organized sports before college emerged slowly. Physical education for boys was introduced to schools during the Civil War era by Dr. Diocletian Lewis, who stressed military drills and gymnastics. In the late 1880s, New England schools adopted the Swedish system of calisthenics, the Midwest favored gymnastics in the Turnverein tradition, and New York, Brooklyn, and Washington, D.C., implemented mixed systems. Girls’ physical education was less rigorous, focusing on light gymnastics, dance, and exercise, activities that were supposed to help them avoid mental strain and become more attractive.

Interscholastic high school sports developed in the 1870s and 1880s, in emulation of college programs. These events were operated by student-run athletic organizations, which financed teams, found playing sites, and booked games, independent of adult interference. The contests promoted school spirit and became a focal point for developing a sense of community among local residents.

Children relied on their own ingenuity when it came to playing sports, arranging their own pick-up ball games with their own rules in vacant fields and alleyways and swimming off city docks or in rural lakes. In the 1880s, Turnverein organizations introduced physical education to elementary schools, and the YMCA established junior departments (ages 10–16) for its middle-class clientele, supposedly to help prolong a needed childhood period of development and defer adolescence.

Inner-city institutional churches and new settlement houses that promoted the social gospel used sports such as baseball, basketball, bowling, boxing, and billiards to attract youth and pull them away from corrupting and dangerous street life. Reformers especially advocated adult-directed team sports to acculturate immigrant boys; elevate their morals, character, and health; build self-confidence; and teach cooperation.

Commercialized Sports

The rise of commercialized, professional spectator sports was the most significant development in post–Civil War athletics. It was facilitated by rapid urbanization, which created the necessary mass audiences, as well as by internal developments in sports, including the rise of entrepreneurs and outstanding athletes. However, prizefighting was barred virtually everywhere because of its brutality, while horse racing was widely banned because of the betting that accompanied it.

The other main professional sport was baseball, already the national pastime, which was considered uplifting, honest, and free of gambling (although there actually was a lot of betting on games). The leading sports promoters were professional politicians or their close associates, who used their connections to protect their investments with preferential treatment from city hall.

Early prizefights were arranged at saloons and staged in barns, on river barges, or in the backrooms of saloons to avoid the police. Fighters often were promoted and managed by big-city machine politicians. In the 1880s, the stature of the ring improved thanks to the adoption of the Marquis of Queensberry rules,
which introduced boxing gloves and three-minute rounds, while banning wrestling and hugging holds. The change made boxing somewhat more humane, and, as a result, the “manly art” gained popularity among upper-class young men. However, the new rules actually had the effect of speeding up fights and made pugilism more dangerous, because fighters could hit harder and throw more punches with protected hands.

In 1890, wide-open New Orleans became the first major city to permit prizefights if they were arranged by an established athletic club. Two years later, the local boxing scene reached its peak with three consecutive days of world championships, culminating in James J. Corbett’s knockout of John L. Sullivan for the heavyweight title.

Shortly thereafter, the center of boxing shifted to Brooklyn, where Coney Island machine politicians protected the sport. Then in 1896, Tammany Hall’s number-two man, State Senator Tim Sullivan, secured passage of the Horton Act, which permitted sparring matches in buildings owned by athletic clubs. However, the new law was repealed by the state four years later in 1900.

Northern horse racing was revived in 1863 at Saratoga, New York, by elite turf men in cooperation with gambling kingpin and former boxing champion John Morrissey. Prestigious jockey clubs soon were formed that established prestigious racetracks, such as New York’s Jerome Park (1866); Monmouth in Long Branch, New Jersey (1870); and Chicago’s Washington Park (1884). The tracks featured rich stakes races to attract the top stables and elegant clubhouses for the pleasure of members.

New York was the national center of the turf, aided by the political clout of leading Democratic horsemen such as financier August Belmont, Sr., trolley magnate William C. Whitney, and Tammany Hall boss Richard Croker, who stood up for horse racing and on-track betting against widespread condemnation. But in Illinois, New Jersey, and several other states, reformers closed the tracks in the 1890s. Still, moralists could not halt illegal off-track betting, which flourished at downtown poolrooms run by organized crime figures and were protected through political connections and payoffs.

Baseball began to become professionalized in the early 1860s, when amateur teams recruited top players with financial incentives. The game became commercialized after William Cammeyer enclosed his Brooklyn skating rink in 1862, renamed it the Union Grounds, and began charging customers 10 cents to watch baseball teams play. In 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stockings, the

In a historic 1892 boxing match, James J. Corbett knocked out John L. Sullivan, the last bare-knuckle heavyweight champion. It was one of the first title bouts fought with gloves and under Marquis of Queensberry rules, which popularized commercial prizefighting. (American Stock/Getty Images)
American Sports in 1900

Sports in America made enormous strides between 1870 and 1900, propelled by industrialization and urbanization, the emergence of new sports, and the flourishing of a positive sports creed. By the end of that era, the United States was one of the leading sporting nations in the world. Sports had become a major male participatory and spectator recreation; however, sports was not democratic, as options varied widely by social class and ethnicity. Professional sports had emerged, dominated by professional baseball. America had gone from a borrower of civilization to an exporter of culture, selling baseball to the Caribbean and Japan, and the new sports of basketball and volleyball (invented in 1891 and 1895, respectively) around the world.

Steven A. Riess

Further Reading


The development of sports in the early twentieth century was influenced significantly by industrialization, urbanization, and Progressiveism, a broad-based social movement that began in the late nineteenth century and continued through the onset of World War I. The Progressive movement originated as a response to the problems associated with rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration in the late nineteenth century. Its goals were to promote political democracy, social justice, economic opportunity, and efficiency through government and philanthropic institutions. It encompassed a wide array of contradictory influences, ranging from liberalism to religious fundamentalism.

Progressive reformers, who were mostly middle-class, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, sought a more orderly society. They campaigned against widespread corruption in state and city governments and the capitalist excesses of the Gilded Age robber barons, who trampled on consumers, workers, the environment, and fair competition. In order to rectify such problems, reformers proposed more direct involvement of citizens in government through the exercise of new powers, including initiatives, referendums, direct recall of politicians and judges, and vigorous application of antitrust laws to combat monopolies.

Social reformers in the early twentieth century looked to sports to ameliorate some of the era’s social problems. The prevailing positive ideology of sports saw athletic activity as a way to promote good character, elevate morals, and enhance public health. Reformers saw sports as a means to socialize immigrant youths and make them into law-abiding, hardworking citizens. Sports also provided an uplifting option to such vile amusements as prostitution, drinking, and gambling. However, certain sports, particularly boxing, which was brutal, and horse racing, which was tied to gambling and corrupt politicians, were anything but elevating entertainment and received severe criticism and calls for their elimination.

Social Reform and Sport
Clergymen also emphasized the social value of sports. The puritanical idea of the body as a source of sinful temptation was rejected in favor of a theology that viewed the body as a physical housing for the soul, and exercise and sports as means of strengthening that shelter, honoring God in the process. This philosophy, known as “muscular Christianity,” became the hallmark of programs developed by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) through World War I. In addition to inventing the sports of basketball and volleyball in the 1890s as a means to enhance the body, physical education teachers promoted American sports throughout the world as part of their evangelical mission.

The social gospel movement, which sought to apply Christian ethics to the problems of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, found sports to be a useful tool to draw inner-city youth to their churches, which often housed gymnasiums. Even more important was the role of settlement houses, which were established in the late 1880s and numbered more than 400 by 1913. They were set up by middle-class men and women who secured large old mansions in slums where they lived and set about studying the social issues of the neighborhood. Once they had identified the community’s problems, they set about working with local residents to solve them.

The best-known settlement house was Hull House, founded on Chicago’s Near West Side in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. There, they fashioned a community institution that worked to Americanize immigrants by providing English-language lessons, cooking classes, and myriad programs to teach social and vocational skills. They also provided a gym and sponsored athletic teams for both boys and girls, both as part of the acculturation process and the broader goal of improving the social, mental, and physical well-being of
inner city residents. The success of Hull House soon spawned similar institutions elsewhere.

Progressive reformers helped enact child labor laws to remove boys and girls from the workplace, despite the wishes of parents, who needed the children’s wages to support their poor families. Reformers also pressed for mandatory education laws, providing a captive audience for teachers who instructed students in proper American middle-class values. At the same time, compulsory physical education classes instilled the traits and training desired by the philosophers and psychologists.

The Progressives sought to alter public space efficiently to promote public health. Architect Daniel Burnham unveiled his City Beautiful movement at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, and went on to develop city plans for Chicago, Cleveland, Ohio, and Washington, D.C. In Chicago, Burnham planned to provide orderly streets ringed by healthy forest preserves and public beaches, all of which were meant to encourage physical activity and demonstrate that the physical environment could shape social behavior.

Even before Burnham’s plan was initiated, Chicago’s reformers developed new play sites throughout the city. Hull House provided a sandlot for young children to keep them safe from street traffic, an idea that had originated in Boston. Such sites grew into playgrounds to accommodate older children in urban neighborhoods. In the larger public parks, the city built field houses with gyms, swimming pools, and clubrooms to attract youth, even during the winter months.

Male and female supervisors in the parks and playgrounds, like teachers in public schools, taught children to play in a manner that was conducive to mainstream norms and standards of healthy competition and avoidance of vice. The field house concept soon was copied by other American cities as a means to alleviate delinquency and direct the leisure activities of the young. Teams that wished to use the facilities had to adhere to American norms by scheduling their practices, while
officials affirmed respect for authority. By 1907, the Playground Association of America assumed national leadership of such adult-directed youth sports.

**Educational Reform and Sport**

The ideas of educational reformers had an important role in encouraging the use of sports in schools. John Dewey of the University of Chicago developed his pragmatic philosophy, which had a great influence on educational reforms throughout the twentieth century. Dewey's emphasis on learning by doing fit well with the belief that team sports developed the leadership abilities, cooperation, and self-sacrifice needed by both athletes and American democracy.

Another important theorist was G. Stanley Hall, the first president of the American Psychological Association, who theorized that societies progressed through stages—from savage to barbarian to civilized states—as evidenced by their methods of play. He reasoned that willpower could be trained, implying that less socially developed groups, such as the immigrants who were then flooding America's shores, could be taught the civilized values of mainstream American culture, in part through participation in sports.

As working-class and ethnic immigrant children began to attend schools after the turn of the century, they were exposed to American sports and games. Initially organized and administered by older students who formed baseball and football clubs, extracurricular activities increasingly came under adult supervision. Student teams in the late nineteenth century often recruited nonstudents for important games, which also involved wagering and had few regulations governing play. Games were arranged through challenges in the newspaper if local leagues did not exist. Even with abundant local competition, high school teams tended to travel widely to contest regional and even national championships.

Reformers sought to institutionalize athletic competition and rid contests of socially undesirable characteristics, such as gambling, drinking, and professionalism. Luther Gulick, formerly a superintendent of physical education at the YMCA and instrumental in the invention of basketball, established the privately funded Public Schools Athletic League (PSAL) in New York City in 1903.

The PSAL sponsored a host of competitive sports aimed at instilling proper values in participants. For children in grades five through eight who had at least a B average and a record of good behavior, it promoted participation in team sports, opportunities to compete for athletic badges in such events as running, jumping, and chinning (today known as chin-ups), and other activities aimed at promoting physical fitness. In addition, interscholastic competition was organized for high school students in most major sports. In 1905, a girls' program was initiated that included a dozen sports and stressed "Athletics for All Girls." Similar adult-controlled athletic associations soon governed interscholastic play in other American cities.

**Sports and Higher Education**

At the college level, too, healthy competition and the institutionalization of sports proceeded apace. Students in the late nineteenth organized their own sporting ventures, including regattas, track meets, and baseball and football contests.

By 1890, football overshadowed all other sports, and teams increasingly relied on professional coaches for leadership. The most influential figure in the sport was Walter Camp, a former team captain and later coach at Yale University who was a central figure in college football's influential rules committee from 1877 until his death in 1925. Football assumed a distinctly American character under Camp's guidance, and he became known as the "Father of American Football."

Football coaches at the turn of the century were among the most influential men on college campuses. For instance, Amos Alonzo Stagg at the University of Chicago was responsible for recruiting and retaining star players, planning practices, creating tactics for games, and scheduling opponents to make sure the team attracted the maximum number of paying fans. Winning was emphasized over sportsmanship.

Football was the "big game" on college campuses—so big that major contests often were played off campus. By the 1890s, big match-ups already were spectacles. The annual championship game between Yale and Princeton universities in New York was preceded by a four-hour parade and drew 40,000 spectators. Yale's success over the last quarter of the nineteenth century served as a model for other football programs, and many athletic clubs and colleges sought out former Yale players, such as Stagg, as coaches.

The growing interest in football led school administrations to take over the programs and create conferences to regulate athletics. Universities began to build new facilities to satisfy public interest in the big game. In 1903, Harvard University constructed Soldiers Field, a 40,000-seat concrete stadium, on its campus.
The stadium commemorated the sacrifice of soldiers, thereby linking the game to nationalism and military values, including self-sacrifice for the greater good. At the same time, the stadium brought profitable contests to the school.

The downsides of big college sports soon became apparent. As early as 1906, University of Michigan President James Angell complained that colleges were becoming hosts to public spectacles, undermining their primary mission of public service. Despite such qualms, colleges concentrated on the advantages of sports. In addition to revenues, football rivalries brought welcome attention—and generous contributions—from alumni.

Schools continued to build new stadiums. In 1914, Princeton University unveiled Palmer Stadium, which seated nearly 46,000, while Yale University surpassed that with the Yale Bowl, with seating for more than 70,000 spectators. Other schools and municipalities built even larger structures to host football games and other civic spectacles.

Another downside of football was the violence of the game. When the 1905 season resulted in at least 18 deaths and 159 serious injuries to players, some colleges dropped the sport in favor of rugby. President Theodore Roosevelt, an ardent advocate and practitioner of sports, called the coaches of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale universities to the White House to discuss reforms. Roosevelt and other national leaders believed that football and other martial sports were essential to building a strong and expansionist nation, an idea that was grounded in the social Darwinist belief in the "survival of the fittest."

When the coaches’ efforts to modify the sport proved ineffective, college presidents formed a governing body, constituted in 1906 as the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States, to enforce the necessary changes. It was renamed the National Collegiate Athletic Association in 1910.

**Regulation of Sport**

One of the most important goals for Progressive reformers was to rid sports of gambling, which they viewed as a corrupting influence, both on the individuals who gambled and on the sports they bet on. Particular attention was focused on prizefighting and thoroughbred racing. The so-called sport of kings was conducted at elite racetracks such as Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, New York, and Washington Park in Chicago, which featured elegant clubhouses for jockey club members and their families, as well as more modest proprietary tracks such as Gravesend in Brooklyn. The prestigious tracks drew the rich and well born for classic events such as the American Derby at Washington Park, though some tracks also drew unsavory characters, including petty criminals and prostitutes.

Reformers in the late nineteenth century raged against gambling at tracks, and they had some success at halting racing, as occurred in New Jersey in 1893 and in Chicago in 1905. Racing in New York ceased in 1910 (though tracks reopened in 1913) as a result of laws passed at the behest of Progressive Governor Charles Evans Hughes. By 1910, the only major tracks in operation were located in Kentucky and Maryland. At the same time, reformers had little success in halting illegal off-track betting, which flourished at downtown poolrooms (betting parlors) or in the neighborhoods with bookmakers.

**Baseball: The National Pastime**

The institutionalization impulse of the Progressive Era also resulted in the consolidation of Major League Baseball. The National League, founded in 1876 as the first major league run on business principles, faced competition in 1901 from another self-proclaimed major league, the American League. In contrast to the National League, American League owners forbade the sale of alcohol at games to promote a more wholesome sporting experience. They undercut National League ticket prices and enticed dozens of National League stars to jump to American League teams. However, after two seasons of financial and legal warfare, the leagues agreed to end their costly competition by uniting to form a single umbrella organization, known as organized baseball, that extended its power to encompass the minor leagues as well. The American and National Leagues agreed to recognize each others’ player contracts, and jointly created the National Commission (comprised of each league’s president and a third party they chose) to mediate any disputes and stage a season-ending World Series between the pennant winners of each league.

Team owners had considerable political connections, which they used to get inside information about the best sites for ballparks, to prevent interlopers from invading their territory, and to obtain preferential treatment from local municipal governments. Baseball dominated the national sporting scene in the early 1900s, and star players became popular heroes. The major leagues were so profitable that by 1915 nearly all
of the teams were playing in large new fire-resistant ballparks.

The boom in baseball extended to the minor leagues as well. In 1912, there were 46 leagues, and nearly every city had a professional team. Fan interest and profit-making potential spurred the emergence of a new rival, the Federal League, which proclaimed itself a major league in 1914, with four of its eight teams in major league cities. The new league tried to recruit established stars with high salaries; though it had little success, the result was significantly higher salaries for veteran players in the Major Leagues.

After the 1915 season, when the Kansas City Feds went bankrupt, organized baseball bought out the owners of the Brooklyn, Buffalo, Newark, and Pittsburgh Federal League teams. In addition, Phil Ball, owner of the St. Louis Terriers, was allowed to buy the St. Louis Browns of the American League, and Charles Weeghman, owner of the Chicago Whales, purchased the Chicago Cubs, and both merged their old and new teams. The Baltimore Terrapins rejected any offers and instead sued Major League Baseball for antitrust violations. The case was held up for several years, until 1922, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of organized baseball and granted it an exemption from antitrust legislation.

**Sports and Class**

Social class was a big factor in determining the sporting options of Americans in an industrialized nation. White-collar workers had more free time and higher incomes than blue-collar workers, who worked, on average, nearly 60 hours a week in manufacturing and 50 hours in construction, typically earning about $438 a year (about $11,500 in 2011 dollars). Typically, Sunday was their only day off, and thus the only day they had free for recreation. However, in the East and the South, blue laws limited their sporting options by prohibiting games on Sundays.

Upper-class men had the most freedom and wealth, and typically engaged in the most expensive sports in the exclusive settings. They belonged to a variety of voluntary sports organizations, many of which required applicants to be approved by current members, such as country clubs, polo clubs, yacht clubs, jockey clubs, athletic clubs, and even selective hunting clubs, such as the 100-member Boone and Crockett Club. Participating in such organizations certified members’ elite status. Playing expensive sports also gave athletes an opportunity to display their wealth, a theme of sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his famous book *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

Elite and middle-class men also were drawn to sports by a need to prove their manliness. In the late nineteenth century, there was concern that men who held sedentary jobs were losing their virility, producing small families, and becoming feminized by religion and culture. Vice President Theodore Roosevelt gave a lecture in 1899, published a year later as the title essay in *The Strenuous Life*, in which he encouraged men to engage in physical activity. Psychologist William James gave a speech in 1906 called “The Moral Equivalent of War,” which many interpreted as promoting football as a character-building sport that approximated the experience of going into combat. These views influenced a focus on a strenuous lifestyle at elite prep schools and college campuses; involvement in physical activity also became seen as an antidote to the debilitating effects of work in modern bureaucracies.

In the early twentieth century, sports flourished among members of the middle class. They took advantage of public facilities at large parks near their homes to play tennis and golf. They joined a variety of sports clubs, ranging from baseball to track and field, tennis, and cycling. Their sons played varsity sports in high schools. In addition, the middle class formed a large segment of spectators at professional baseball games.

Poorer workers mainly played sports that were inexpensive and accessible in neighborhood saloons, such as billiards or bowling (in basement alleys), or else attended boxing matches in a saloon backroom or a nearby gymnasium. Other working-class athletes saw sports such as baseball and boxing as a means of securing employment and achieving social mobility. They might participate in track and field events at a union picnic on Labor Day or an outing sponsored by a local machine boss.

A growing number of workers participated in industrial sports programs sponsored by companies such as the Ford Motor Company and Hershey’s Chocolate, which aimed to promote teamwork and loyalty in their labor force. Some companies recruited the YMCA to dispense their particular brand of morality through sports. A number of firms, including the Pullman Palace Car Company and Bethlehem Steel, sponsored company teams that played baseball, football, soccer, or rowed against other companies. In 1920, the American Professional Football Association (which became the National Football League in 1922) was formed by several company squads, including Delco’s Dayton Triangles and Green Bay’s Indian Packing Company.
African Americans

Restrictions on participation in sports proved most severe for African Americans. They encountered Jim Crow laws in the South that barred them from most city parks and prevented interracial athletic competition. A few of the best black athletes in the South migrated north, but for the most part, programs at historically black colleges and universities offered the only opportunities to participate in sports. In 1910, about 10 percent of, or less than 1 million, African Americans lived in the North. That number increased dramatically following the Great Migration (1916–1919), as the urban black population in the North rose 500,000 by 1920 and another 1 million by 1930. Even in the North, African Americans often lived in impoverished ghettos with inadequate recreation facilities and still faced segregation at YMCAs, parks, and beaches.

Many blacks in the late nineteenth century were highly skilled athletes, especially in baseball. However, they were banned from the major leagues after 1884, and from all professional baseball leagues after 1899. Consequently, black players sought employment on all-black teams that barnstormed much of the year. In 1920, the Negro National League was formed in the Midwest with eight franchises, seven of which were owned by African Americans.

African Americans were very successful as jockeys during the later decades of the nineteenth century. Their success, however, created a backlash, and white competitors forced them from the sport in the early 1900s.

A few African Americans achieved great success competing against white competitors. Marshall “Major” Taylor bested all others in the world sprint cycling championship in 1899. By 1900, he had set seven world records, but jealous white opponents obstructed his efforts thereafter, forcing him to compete in Europe and Australia. Meanwhile, George Poage won two bronze medals as a hurdler at the 1904 Olympic Games in St. Louis, Missouri.

African American basketball teams began to appear in New York, Chicago, and the Baltimore–Washington, D.C., areas. They formed a black basketball circuit. Teams such as the New York Renaissance, known as the Rens, would be fully professionalized in the 1920s.

Boxing offered blacks a venue for interracial competition in some parts of the North, though they were restricted to the less prestigious lower weight levels. Joe Gans reigned as the world lightweight champion from 1902 until 1908. While whites assumed that blacks lacked endurance and the competitive instinct, white heavyweight champions refused to fight blacks in title matches, as the crown symbolized white superiority. Then, in 1908, Canadian champion Tommy Burns agreed to fight Jack Johnson, a black contender, in Australia. Johnson’s easy victory sparked an ongoing but unsuccessful search for the “Great White Hope” who might return the laurel to the white race.

With the heavyweight crown resting on Johnson’s head, the prevailing belief in white superiority suffered a severe blow. In 1910, undefeated heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries came out of retirement to regain the title, only to be knocked out by the flamboyant Johnson. Johnson’s triumph set off celebrations by jubilant blacks, though white retaliation resulted in several riots and deaths.

The black champion further provoked mainstream white society by challenging its mores, marrying a succession of white women. In 1913, Johnson was convicted for violating the Mann Act, which made it illegal to take a woman across state lines for sexual purposes. He fled the country and went to Europe. In 1915, Johnson lost his title in Havana, Cuba, to the white giant Jess Willard in 26 rounds.

White Ethnics

Immigrants from Central Europe came to the United States with a heritage of physical culture. Germans brought their Turner societies to America by 1848, and later in the century, Czech Sokols and Polish Falcons established gymnastic clubs to promote physical fitness and sustain their ethnic culture. However, the second generation—immigrant children born or raised in the United States—was more influenced by American sports played in schools, parks, and playgrounds, and they increasingly adopted baseball, basketball, and football.

German American youths from the Buffalo, New York, YMCA, for example, captured the Amateur Athletic Union basketball championship in 1901. Three years later, they won the basketball tournament at the Olympic Games in St. Louis and then became professional barnstormers. Their success inspired other ethnic teams, such as the Celtics (originally from New York), as well as numerous Jewish clubs.

New immigrants from Russia and Italy arrived with no sporting heritage. However, their sons wanted to acculturate and enjoy American pastimes. German Jews founded settlement houses during the Progressive Era to help their Eastern European brethren become Americanized. Settlement houses used adult-directed
have delicate constitutions and behave in a ladylike manner. Sports were exertive and competitive and traditionally a male sphere. Physicians worried that participation in sports might injure women’s supposedly delicate bodies and damage their reproductive organs. Women physical educators opposed vigorous exercise and competitive sports, because they feared participants would become aggressive and manly.

A leading feminist who had a long history of supporting sports, Charlotte Perkins Gilman saw sports as a means for women to take control of their own bodies. She founded the Providence (Rhode Island) Ladies’ Sanitary Gymnasium in 1881.

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Women’s sports were advocated in the early twentieth century by feminists and other proponents who believed that sports improved young women’s health and beauty, promoted self-confidence, and offered a source of enjoyment. Illustrator Charles Dana Gibson’s iconic “Gibson Girl” was a beautiful young lady who often was drawn holding a tennis racket or a golf club.

At the same time, there was substantial opposition to women participating in sports, a legacy of the Victorian era, when ‘respectable’ women were believed to have delicate constitutions and behave in a ladylike manner. Sports were exertive and competitive and traditionally a male sphere. Physicians worried that participation in sports might injure women’s supposedly delicate bodies and damage their reproductive organs. Women physical educators opposed vigorous exercise and competitive sports, because they feared participants would become aggressive and manly.

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Around the turn of the century, wealthy women began to establish their own athletic clubs. The first was the Chicago Athletic Club in 1898, whose president was Belle Ogden Armour, wife of renowned meatpacker Philip Armour. The goal of the club was to provide women with the same opportunities for exercise,
relaxation, and sociability that were available in men’s clubs; its elegant clubhouse had a marble swimming pool, gymnasium, bowling alley, and running track. As other clubs formed, the Federation of Women’s Athletic Clubs was established in 1901 to advance their common concerns.

Upper-class and upper-middle-class women took up tennis and golf, often at country clubs where their fathers or husbands were members; cycling, which provided a degree of independence; or college sports such as basketball and rowing. An adventurous handful succeeded at male-dominated sports, such as mountain climbing. Such athletic activities called for reforms in dress, and bustled skirts and corsets gave way to shorter skirts and attire that permitted greater freedom of movement. Margaret Abbott, a Chicagoan on sojourn in Paris in 1900, became the first female Olympic golf champion when she won a tournament against opponents who played in high-heeled shoes.

On the tennis courts, May Sutton adopted short-sleeved blouses, which enabled her to hit powerful, overhead strokes, and shorter skirts that helped her move around the court like her male counterparts. She won the national women’s singles championship in 1904. Sutton’s contemporary, Eleanora Sears, further defied convention by wearing pants and challenging men in athletic pursuits. Sears played baseball, field hockey, and golf, and she won several national championships in tennis and squash. In 1912, she took up polo, not only playing against men, but also riding in the straddle position, a departure from the customary sidesaddle position deemed appropriate for women. Later, she took to racing cars and airplanes, further pushing the boundaries that restricted women’s lives.

In addition to individual sports, there also was interest among colleges in team sports, particularly the new sport of basketball. James Naismith invented the game at the International YMCA Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1891. Shortly thereafter, Senda Berenson adapted the game for women at nearby Smith College in Northampton.

Berenson alleviated some of the concerns about women’s participation in sports by dividing the basketball court into three segments, with two players from each team confined to a single zone, thus limiting the amount of running involved. To facilitate movement, the hemlines of the players’ skirts were shortened to above the ankle, exposing flesh previously hidden from male view and thus necessitating a ban on most male spectators.

Women took readily to basketball, and it spread rapidly across the country. Intramural contests gave way to interscholastic and club competitions, although female physical educators discouraged unladylike competition by mixing players from different teams for contests. Games were followed by postgame refreshments, a means of further fostering noncompetitive camaraderie.

Female physical educators wanted their students to participate in sports that promoted sociability, like play days, when young women from different colleges would be mixed together to play recreational sports and make new friends. Women sports leaders successfully curtailed intercollegiate sports for female college students, because such contests stressed the undesirable attribute of being highly competitive and challenged gender boundaries. Meanwhile, working-class women, found greater opportunities for sports in the parks, play grounds, settlement houses, and industrial recreation teams fostered by the Progressive movement.

### The Military and World War I

The American military used sports a means of spreading American cultural hegemony. After the Spanish-American War in 1898, soldiers and marines introduced baseball and boxing to the residents of the newly acquired Philippines and competed against Caribbean teams. American military baseball teams competed with Japanese teams as early as the 1890s, and American college teams began traveling to Japan for international series in the next decade. In turn, Japanese teams toured the United States, Hawaii, and the Philippines, playing American sports rather than introducing Japanese ones. In the Philippines, the YMCA organized the Far East Games, an Asian Olympics, between Japan, China, and the Philippines in 1912, as Western sports spread across the Pacific.

The beginning of World War I hastened the Americanization process, as local and national governments issued propaganda against foreign cultures. Ethnic sports, in particular German gymnastic systems, were purged from school curricula. Participation in American sports became a badge of loyalty, and even German Turner societies fielded their own baseball and basketball teams.

The military had relied on sports in training programs in the late nineteenth century, and this became even more important during and after World War I. With the onset of war, fitness became essential for combat troops, and boxing was seen as a way to simulate
bayonet training. The U.S. government employed Walter Camp, former football coach at Yale University, to develop the “Daily Dozen,” a system of calisthenics for the U.S. Army. The YMCA was secured to provide services and moral guidance to American troops, and sports became a primary means of both training and recreation on military bases. During this time, the military produced some of the best football teams in the country, with the 1918 and 1919 Rose Bowl games featuring contingents from the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marines.

**Limits of Progressive Reform**

Despite their efforts to spread American sports and middle-class values of healthy competition and clean play, the Progressive reformers were not completely successful. While many ethnic immigrants moved closer to the mainstream sporting culture and women achieved increased but still limited opportunities on the playing field, sports could not ameliorate all urban problems. Despite the efforts of settlement house workers, youth gangs continued to operate, often with the blessing and sponsorship of powerful politicians, engaging in illicit activities and even using the parks and playgrounds as their headquarters.

Gender and class conceptions also thwarted the aims of reformers, as men clung to the bachelor subculture of the past. Working-class men met in saloons for gambling, drinking, and revelry that often revolved around sporting activities, such as boxing. The growth of pool halls and bowling alleys provided additional sites for the maintenance of the male sporting culture and the extension of gambling practices. The beginning of Prohibition actually led to a boom in poolrooms, as tavern keepers moved into the business, but shortly thereafter, cities such as Chicago introduced stricter regulations, and the number of poolrooms dropped from 2,244 in 1920 to 861 in 1922.

Perhaps the greatest symbolic failure of the Progressives’ moral crusade was the infamous Black Sox scandal. Baseball, the national game, symbolized all that Americans believed to be good about their nation, standing for integrity, fair play, democracy, and meritocracy. It was the primary sport used to acculturate immigrant youth in parks and playgrounds, and ethnic stars in the major leagues reinforced the perception of baseball as a level playing field (though the game excluded African Americans) and a means to achieve social mobility and acceptance. In 1919, players on the Chicago White Sox—arguably the best team in baseball at the time—colluded with gamblers to lose the World Series against the Cincinnati Reds. Revelations of the subterfuge took almost a year to emerge and led to the reform of the major leagues under a powerful commissioner of baseball, former federal judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis. The authoritarian leader underscored the need to clean up baseball by imposing a lifetime ban on the eight White Sox players involved in the scandal.

With the rise of George Herman “Babe” Ruth and other athletic stars, a new era in American sports began. The so-called golden age of American sports—the 1920s and 1930s—would see spectator sports gain a vast new audience through the media of radio and film. Sports may have maintained an ideology that justified it as building character, improving morality, promoting good health, and epitomizing democracy, but increasingly the emphasis was on sports as a business.

**Gerald R. Gems**

**Further Reading**


Rise of Consumer Culture and the “Golden Age” of American Sport

During the 1920s, the manufacture of consumer goods expanded the nation’s economy dramatically. Standards of living increased, as many Americans enjoyed more leisure time and higher salaries. The new economic order produced an increasingly homogeneous, consumer-oriented national society. And sports ranked high on the list of activities that consumers spent their money and time on.

Baseball and football enjoyed acclaim in almost all segments of American society. In fact, Americans viewed team sports as part of the cultural fabric that knit their society together. To accommodate the continuing interest in professional baseball and the burgeoning fascination with intercollegiate football, enormous stadiums, seating 50,000 or more fans, were constructed in cities with professional baseball teams and in major college football towns, from the Bronx’s 58,000-seat Yankee Stadium (1923) to Ann Arbor’s 84,500-seat University of Michigan Stadium (1927).

Baseball

In the 1920s, Major League Baseball underwent a fundamental reorganization to respond to changing market conditions, to develop centralized authority, and to systematize its player development system. The league also had to respond to the damaging Black Sox scandal of 1919, in which members of the Chicago White Sox colluded with gamblers to lose the World Series. The ensuing furor prompted baseball owners to hammer out the 1921 National Agreement, which created a commissioner’s office to oversee the sport with Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis as the all-powerful first commissioner. Led by Branch Rickey, then the general manager of the St. Louis Cardinals, Major League
College football grew dramatically in popularity, and by several measures, “King Football” surpassed even baseball during the 1920s. Major League Baseball was played in only ten U.S. cities, whereas college football was a national phenomenon. Most Americans lived near one of the 400 colleges or universities that fielded a football squad. National powers sprang up in small towns as well as in metropolitan areas in the Midwest, South, and Far West. Millions of Americans identified with their local gridiron heroes as “our boys.”

Yet baseball suffered a relative decline during this period, as its market share slipped compared to other leisure pursuits. For example, Major League Baseball’s growth lagged far behind the 75 percent rise in attendance at the movies. In fact, gross attendance at major league games rose by only 11.5 percent during the 1920s—less than the growth rate of the national population.

Baseball also created a “farm system” to develop minor league talent.

The game on the field underwent an offensive revolution, with livelier balls and the banning of trick pitches. Batting averages rose and scoring skyrocketed. The fan-pleasing home run increased ticket sales and made George Herman “Babe” Ruth the most famous American of the era. Ruth—whose penchant for the good life mirrored the hedonistic spirit of the times—slugged more home runs than most entire teams, setting a single-season record of 60 in 1927 and 714 over the course of his career. He earned fame and fortune by turning himself into a brand name, marketed by agent Christy Walsh.

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“King Football”
The “Four Horsemen” of Notre Dame—the 1924 backfield of (left to right) Don Miller, Elmer Layden, Jim Crowley, and Harry Stuhldreher—became part of the school’s football lore. College football was king among American sports in the interwar period. (The Granger Collection, New York)

The University of Notre Dame, a little-known Midwestern Catholic college, developed into a gridiron powerhouse. Charismatic coach Knute Rockne promoted his squads in the national press by traveling coast to coast to take on national competitors, and by allowing national radio networks to broadcast Notre Dame games for free. Rockne connected Notre Dame to the Catholic community by building a loyal group of “subway alumni” who had never even attended the school. He stocked his squad with the sons of European immigrants, exploiting the American melting pot to build ties to Irish, Italian, and other ethnic communities. Most important, the Notre Dame team won consistently against traditional powerhouses. From 1918 until Rockne’s untimely demise in an airplane crash in 1931, his squads went 105–12–5.

Likewise, other major college programs built media allegiances, developed broadcasting contracts, played intersectional games against powerful opponents, and made coaches symbols of their institutions. Among these acclaimed coaches were Glenn “Pop” Warner at the University of Pittsburgh and Stanford University, and Amos Alonzo Stagg at the University of Chicago.

Horse Racing and Prizefighting

During the interwar period, more Americans attended horse races annually than any other sport’s events, although a championship heavyweight prizefight in
1927 drew a crowd of more than 100,000, Chicago’s 1937 Austin–Leo city high school football championship at Soldier Field was attended by more than 120,000, and the annual Indianapolis 500 drew more than 150,000. Race tracks thrived as the introduction of pari-mutuel gambling sparked a resurgence in racing, long a staple of American culture, which reform nearly had quashed in the early 1900s. As the era of Progressive reform faded, the public’s appetite for gambling, always the central attraction of horse racing, returned.

Prizefighting had existed for more than a century as the province of working-class and wealthy men who were attracted to violence and gambling, but the sport was illegal in most states until the 1920s, when public opinion began to shift. By then, New York and other states had legalized boxing, at least in part due to a recognition of its value in training soldiers during World War I. A shrewd new cadre of promoters led by George “Tex” Rickard legitimized prizefighting. Rickard promoted fights as wholesome spectacles with million-dollar purses, mainstream press coverage, and the patronage of political, business, and social leaders. He transformed prizefights into cultural events that attracted an audience of both men and women for a glamorous night out.

Rickard’s biggest draw was Jack Dempsey, who won the heavyweight championship in 1919 against the gargantuan Jess Willard. “Jack the Giant Killer” became an overnight celebrity, a true rags-to-riches tale. Rickard matched Dempsey against aging, overhyped contenders in million-dollar fights staged in huge venues. Dempsey fought sparingly, holding his title until 1926, when he was upset by Gene “The Fighting Marine” Tunney before 120,000 fans in Philadelphia. Rickard cleverly set up a rematch one year later before 104,000 spectators at Soldier Field in Chicago, while another 50 million listened to a national radio broadcast of the bout. Tunney won a controversial decision over the former champion in the infamous “long-count” fight, when Dempsey failed to go to a neutral corner after knocking down Tunney. The referee delayed starting the count for five seconds, giving Tunney extra time to recover.

Great Depression

In the 1930s, the thriving consumer culture began to unravel as the U.S. economy slid into financial collapse. By 1933, unemployment in the United States reached nearly 25 percent. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs promoted relief, recovery, and reform, but it was not until the end of the decade that Americans saw an upturn.

The Great Depression had a significant impact on American sports. Expenditures for sporting goods dropped, along with attendance at sporting events. Many minor league baseball teams folded, and nascent sports operations suffered, such as the American Basketball League, the American Soccer League, and the first Negro National League, all of which failed. Meanwhile, the National Hockey League and National Football League both lost a substantial number of franchises.

Baseball

The specter of bankruptcy even hovered over Major League Baseball. Attendance declined from 10 million in 1930 to 6 million by 1933. The floundering St. Louis Browns drew only 80,000 fans to their home games in 1933, and they joined other struggling franchises in pleading unsuccessfully with the league for a profit-sharing plan. Teams slashed player salaries from an average of $7,000 in 1933 to $4,500 in 1936, cut rosters, and downsized umpiring crews. By 1935, however, major league attendance was on the rise again, reaching its pre-Depression level by 1941.

The Depression produced some innovations in baseball. The Cincinnati Reds introduced night games, an idea borrowed from the Negro and minor leagues. Owners looked for new sources of revenue in radio and advertising. Major League Baseball initially resisted broadcasting games, fearing a decline in attendance, but in the 1930s, several teams developed regional radio networks. In 1934, Commissioner of Baseball Kenesaw Mountain Landis signed a $400,000 contract for a nationwide broadcast of the World Series, sponsored by Ford and Gillette. When Prohibition ended in 1933, teams rushed to ink deals with reopened breweries. By 1935, however, major league attendance was on the rise again, reaching its pre-Depression level by 1941.

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Other Sports Industries

Certain segments of the sports industry actually grew during the Great Depression, as they offered a temporary escape for the masses. College football suffered initial losses at the turnstiles, leading a few schools to eliminate their football programs; however, the game soon rebounded. Most programs cut ticket prices, which helped double attendance from 10 million to 20 million between 1930 and 1937. College and high school
administrators cut women’s sports programs, but attendance at men’s basketball games increased.

Public participation in golf, tennis, and bowling remained steady. In 1932, Lake Placid, New York, hosted the Winter Olympic Games, while Los Angeles put on the Summer Games. Prizefighting remained a popular and lucrative business, and attendance increased at the race track.

Seabiscuit, an unlikely thoroughbred with a strange gait, served during the Depression as an apt symbol of perseverance against great obstacles and became a beloved folk hero. As a two-year-old in 1935, he won only five of his first 35 races, and he did not begin to win regularly until late as a three-year-old. Then, as a four-year-old, he became the nation’s leading money winner. As a five-year-old, Seabiscuit was named Horse of the Year, an accomplishment highlighted by his victory in a match race against War Admiral, winner of the Triple Crown in 1937.

New Deal for Sports

President Roosevelt appreciated the American public’s appetite for sports. As governor of New York, he supported the Lake Placid Olympics as a linchpin of economic rejuvenation, and he used the winter carnival to garner attention for his presidential bid. Roosevelt peppered his famous “fireside chats” with sports analogies and urged Americans to enjoy the escape that sports provided.

Roosevelt made sports a key component of his New Deal. The Civilian Conservation Corps, Works Progress Administration, and other agencies put people to work by constructing a vast new system of recreational facilities. Federal workers erected parks, playgrounds, gymnasiums, and swimming pools. On federal lands, they constructed campgrounds and cut hiking trails through forests. Between 1935 and 1941, the federal government spent $941 million on sports venues and other recreational areas and an additional $229 million to finance community recreation.

The Fans

The Depression did not dampen the public’s enthusiasm for sports as much as it reduced consumption in almost every other sector of the economy. Americans continued to buy tickets for games. Radio ratings rose for many sports. More people read the sports pages and watched sports segments on newsreels than in the prosperous 1920s.

“Golden Age” of Sportwriting

In the 1920s and 1930s, sports journalism in newspapers and magazines blossomed. Sports accounted for 5 percent of the average newspaper’s volume in 1900, but an astounding 25 percent by 1925. Sportswriters became journalistic stars, earning higher salaries and greater editorial freedom than news or editorial writers. Journalism critics complained that readers cared more about sports than the leading civic issues of the day.

One group of reporters developed a style that turned sporting events into epics peopled by larger-than-life heroes. Grantland Rice, the most widely syndicated American columnist, made an art form of this style, crafting majestic poetry for athletic sagas. Lesser writers turned the “Gee Whiz” school into sappy hyperbole. Another school of reporting led by Paul Gallico, Ring Lardner, Damon Runyon, and John Tunis combined sports with social criticism, turning sports coverage into extended social commentary. Many of these writers went on to become accomplished essayists, novelists, and screenwriters.

Journalists even made news, creating new contests. The Chicago Tribune and New York Daily News invented the Golden Gloves boxing championship in the 1920s. Arch Ward of the Chicago Tribune devised the Major League Baseball All-Star Game (1933) and the College All-Star Football Game (1935). Local papers sponsored myriad contests, games, and teams.

Radio and Newsreels

Americans not only read about sports, they also listened to broadcasts of sporting events on the radio and watched sports replays on newsreels. Indeed, sports filled the radio waves even before the first for-profit stations existed. Stations carried prizefights, beginning with Dempsey’s title defenses in 1920 and 1921. Pittsburgh’s KDKA, America’s first commercial radio station, made sports a staple, airing Major League Baseball and college football games in 1921. A year later, New Jersey’s WJZ broadcast the World Series. Other stations followed suit, and by the mid-1920s, broadcasts of the Indianapolis 500 and the Kentucky Derby also could be heard on the radio.

Coast-to-coast networks such as the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC, 1926) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS, 1927) made sports transmission a nationwide habit. Broadcasts bolstered fan devotion and spurred attendance, particularly for the top
teams and important matches. The 1938 fight between Max Schmeling and Joe Louis, a rematch of the German's stunning 1936 upset of the African American star, drew the largest audience in the history of the medium to that time. Two-thirds of Americans tuned in to hear Louis knock out Schmeling in the first round.

Newsreels served as the precursor to televised sports, broadcasting a visual “magazine” of world and national news, human-interest features, and sports that became a template for later local television news programs. During the interwar era, 30 million to 100 million Americans watched newsreels every week. Athletic events from the Olympic Games to Alaskan dogsled races filled the newsreels.

**Participants**

Recreational opportunities for average Americans expanded dramatically during the prosperous 1920s. The Depression lowered standards of living, but most Americans still embraced the new recreations that emerged in the more affluent era. While some private recreational ventures and welfare capitalism programs failed, the federal government stepped in to boost participatory sports.

**Golf, Tennis, Swimming, Bowling, Driving, and Cycling**

In the 1920s, the middle class flocked to country club sports such as tennis, golf, and swimming, once the province of the elite. Cheaper, mass-produced sporting goods combined with the expansion of club facilities broadened the demographics of tennis and golf. Golf boomed among businessmen seeking to make valuable contacts. During the Depression, one-third of clubs went bankrupt; however, federal, state, and local public works programs built hundreds of municipal golf courses, as well as tennis courts and swimming pools.

Bowling in the 1920s boomed among the working class, becoming one of the most popular participatory sports. The number of American Bowling Congress-sanctioned bowling alleys grew from 450 to 2,000. They went “dry” during the 1920s because of Prohibition, helping to make bowling a family game. Most alleys weathered the downturn of the 1930s by providing inexpensive entertainment. In 1933, when Prohibition was repealed, breweries underwrote local bowling leagues, and alleys again thrived as male social centers. Bowling in the 1930s was the leading women’s recreation as well. In 1939, the all-male American Bowling Congress (founded in 1895) merged with the all-female Women’s International Bowling Congress (founded in 1916) to form the International Bowling Association.

The automobile revolution had an enormous impact on American culture in the 1920s, vastly expanding public access to camping, hiking, skiing, and other outdoor pastimes, but nearly killing off cycling for transportation and recreation among adults. Bicycles became children’s toys. In the 1930s, bicycle companies struggled to survive. Schwinn, for instance, focused on producing inexpensive bicycles. Its new Excelsior model, with fat tires, a spring fork, and a rugged frame, became a best seller for youths whose parents could afford it.

**Youth Sports Explosion**

American children and adolescents engaged in sports in ever-growing numbers during the interwar years. In the 1920s, elementary and secondary schools developed comprehensive programs for boys that typically included baseball, basketball, football, and track and field. Interscholastic sports became a hallmark of adolescent life. High school varsity squads shaped the identities of villages, towns, and urban neighborhoods. High school football in the interwar years became a Friday night staple in many areas.

High school basketball’s growth symbolized the new importance of youth sports in American life. In basketball-obsessed Indiana, for example, many towns built gymnasiums with seating that exceeded their populations in order to draw fans from surrounding communities. Basketball, which required little space, also flourished in crowded metropolitan areas. By 1939, more than 95 percent of the nation’s schools sponsored basketball teams.

Basketball fostered ethnic and religious as well as local and regional identities. Youth organizations, such as the Young Men’s Christian Association and the Young Men’s Hebrew Association, promoted it. Successful Jewish teams in New York City and other large metropolitan areas made basketball an important game for developing a Jewish American identity. In 1930, the Catholic Youth Organization developed leagues in Chicago, New York, and other cities to provide athletic competition for second-generation immigrant youths within a religious environment.

Other programs trained younger boys for high schools squads. In 1929, the Junior Football Conference was founded, later becoming known as the Pop Warner Conference, named for the renowned college coach. In
1939, Little League baseball was invented by Carl Stolz in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Pop Warner football and Little League baseball created adult-supervised games that supplanted the child-centered and child-oriented sandlot experiences of earlier generations.

**Women’s Sport**

From 1920 to 1945, women both gained and lost ground on American playing fields. The best American female athletes garnered more attention and had more opportunities than in past eras. The media celebrated new female sports stars as symbols of women’s new political and social freedoms, but many women found their athletic horizons limited.

The Catholic Youth Organization, Young Women’s Christian Association, and Young Women’s Hebrew Association provided some opportunities, but a battle raged in coeducational public schools over the inclusion of girls in competitive sports. In the early 1920s, many schools fielded interscholastic girls’ teams in basketball, volleyball, and track and field, but they came under fire from female physical education teachers and administrators who feared that competitive sports threatened femininity.

The Women’s Division of the National Amateur Athletic Foundation, established in 1923, led the assault against competitive sports for women. By the early 1930s, members of the organization had closed most women’s intercollegiate programs and led a campaign to end statewide high school basketball tournaments, succeeding in 14 states.

Women’s sports continued to thrive at the highest competitive levels, however. The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) established national championships for women’s swimming and diving in 1916, and added track and field in 1924 and basketball in 1926. “Amateur” female athletes, such as tennis player Helen Wills Moody and golfer Glenna Collett Vare, became celebrities, earning substantial sums under the table.

American women had more opportunities in the Olympics as the International Olympic Committee added more women’s sports, including figure skating, swimming and diving, tennis, and track and field. Medalists, such as diver Aileen Riggin, swimmers Sybil Bauer and Gertrude Ederle, and sprinter Elizabeth Robinson, became national heroines. In fact, the two Olympic swimmers pushed the boundaries of gender stereotypes by besting their male rivals. In 1924, Bauer set a world record in the backstroke, while Ederle became a celebrity in 1926 when she was the first woman to swim the English Channel, beating the prior record—set by a man—by more than two hours.

At the same time, athletic heroines became sex symbols for male audiences, reinforcing the old gender stereotypes. The media and fans were especially fond of “feminine” sports, particularly figure skating, tennis, swimming, diving, and golf. The media’s increased coverage of female athletes provided opportunities for pictures of women in revealing swimsuits, short tennis skirts, and skating costumes.

Sex appeal also had an impact on other women’s sports. Municipal and industrial basketball, volleyball, and softball leagues sprang up for working-class women; the leagues developed high-level competition and dominated the AAU championships. Their administrators, however, pointedly capitalized on the combination of athleticism and attractiveness, parading their athletes in beauty contests as well as in athletic competitions.

The greatest female athlete of the era was a working-class Texan, Mildred “Babe” Didrikson, who starred in AAU basketball tournaments and won the 1932 AAU track and field championship as a one-woman team. Limited to three events at the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, she won two gold medals and one silver medal. The press applauded her athleticism but questioned her femininity, viewing her as “mannish.” In the mid-1930s, Didrikson took up golf, which was considered a more acceptable sport for women.

**Sports Stars and American Identities**

While new female athletes dramatized American debates over gender, both male and female athletes served as catalysts for the formation of ethnic, racial, and religious identities.

**Ethnic and Religious Dimensions**

Nativism, or anti-immigrant sentiment, was rife in the 1920s, as Americans responded to the waves of newcomers arriving in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sports seemed to provide an outlet to counter nativism and to provide minorities a way to fit into American society. Social commentators claimed that for European Americans, sports represented a “melting pot.”

Every major European ethnic group had major league stars to cheer. German Americans applauded English Channel swimmer Gertrude Ederle. Italian Americans identified with baseball star Joe DiMaggio.
College football rosters increasingly were dotted with the offspring of the "new immigration" from Southern and Eastern Europe, from the University of Notre Dame's Italian Joe Savoldi to the University of Minnesota's Polish-Ukrainian Bronko Nagurski to Columbia University's Jewish Sid Luckman. The Notre Dame squad represented the new multiethnic reality of American sports; the "Fighting Irish" were icons for the new European Americans who formed the bedrock of the nation's Catholic communities.

The ethnic and religious dimensions of American society also emerged in other sports, notably boxing and basketball. Jewish Americans dominated all levels of basketball, including urban professional leagues, serving simultaneously as symbols of cultural pride and successful assimilation. They also were very successful in prizefighting, where heroes such as champions Benny Leonard and Barney Ross disproved negative stereotypes about Jewish manliness.

Italians, Poles, and Jews only achieved major breakthroughs in baseball in the 1930s. Slugger Hank Greenberg of the Detroit Tigers became the new Jewish athletic hero for smashing home runs, standing up against anti-Semitism, and following his religious convictions by refusing to play in a game held on Yom Kippur, a Jewish holy day.

Race and Segregation

For non-European ethnic groups, sports also revealed the complex patterns of assimilation and identity. Native Americans took pride in the achievements of baseball and football star Jim Thorpe, one of the most accomplished athletes of the twentieth century. Native Hawaiian Duke Paoa Kahanamoku won Olympic swimming medals and introduced surfing to the mainland. These indigenous athletes provided white Americans with both exotic heroes and reassurance about the benefits of acculturation.

African American participation in sports presented a more mixed picture of inclusion and exclusion. Professional baseball kept an impermeable barrier in place, relegating black players to the Negro Leagues. Nonetheless, pitching star Satchel Paige led black all-stars against St. Louis Cardinals pitching ace Dizzy Dean and his major league all-stars in exhibitions during the 1930s. The National Football League included a few black stars, such as Fritz Pollard in the 1920s, but then it drew the color line in 1934.

Golf, tennis, and even bowling largely excluded black athletes. American Olympic teams included some blacks, particularly in track and field. At the 1932 Olympic Games, African American sprinters Eddie Tolan and Ralph Metcalfe dazzled the nation with their multiple-medal performances.

Football and other college sports provided a pastiche of semipermeable boundaries in an era of "gentlemen's agreements" that mostly excluded black athletes. Southern universities were rigidly segregated, but a few African Americans appeared on teams in the North and the West. Some Southern universities refused to play against integrated teams at home or on the road, while others would play integrated squads in major intersectional contests when they ventured north. Northern schools with black athletes generally adhered to Southern wishes, but by the early 1940s, New York University and Pennsylvania State University began challenging these pacts, demanding that their black athletes be allowed to play wherever their teams competed.

Top black college athletes became popular figures. Tolan and Metcalfe starred at the University of Michigan and Marquette University, respectively, and Jesse Owens became a track sensation at Ohio State University. The University of California, Los Angeles led the nation in recruiting black stars, such as quarterback Kenny Washington and running back Jackie Robinson.

Prizefighting drew a color line in the prestigious heavyweight division, fearing the rise of another Jack Johnson, although lower weight classes allowed black champions. In 1937, with the heavyweight crown tarnished by a series of white journeymen champions, the color barrier collapsed when Joe Louis earned a title shot and seized the champion's belt, which he wore until 1949.

In the late 1930s, as the world moved toward war once again, Louis and Owens turned in unforgettable performances on the international stage, making them the leading African American heroes of their era. Owens's triumphs at the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 and Louis's defeat of German boxer Schmeling in 1938 also made them the first African Americans to rank as interracial national heroes.

Louis in particular served as a powerful emblem of black identity, as African Americans listened to radio broadcasts of his bouts, celebrating his victories and mourning his only defeat back in 1936 to Schmeling. During World War II, Louis joined the government's war effort, serving in the military and fighting bouts to benefit war relief, while also allying with other African American leaders to fight economic and social discrimination.
To bolster its image as a world city, Los Angeles rigorously petitioned the International Olympic Committee, winning the right to host the 1932 Games. Then, in the depths of the Great Depression, the city put on a spectacle promoting Southern California while American athletes romped to a medal-count blowout. Although they were bested by Germany at the 1936 Berlin Games, Americans sought solace in Owens's victories on the field and against Nazi racial ideology, though some commentators responded by pointing out America's own racial hypocrisies.

**World War II**

World War II transformed the nation. Industrial production for the war effort ended the Great Depression and revitalized the economy, while the homogenizing, centralizing, and nationalizing tendencies of modern warfare altered American social patterns. The United
States exited the war with a firmer commitment to live up to its professed ideals of equality, a political necessity in its new role as a world superpower.

On the home front, the military's needs thinned the ranks of college and professional athletes. College football teams struggled, except for those of the U.S. Military Academy and the U.S. Naval Academy; both schools enjoyed burgeoning enrollments and fielded powerful football squads. The U.S. Military Academy's team (known as Army) went undefeated and finished at the top of the college football polls in 1944 and 1945. The 1945 Army–Navy game was the first nationwide network football telecast.

Baseball also suffered manpower shortages. President Roosevelt chose not to close down the game, citing the national pastime's role in boosting morale. However, approximately 1,000 players enlisted in the war effort, causing the quality of play to decline markedly, as clubs scrambled to fill rosters with marginal talents, including youths and even a one-armed player.

Into the breach stepped Chicago Cubs owner Philip K. Wrigley, who organized the Midwestern four-city All-American Girls Softball League in 1943, the first professional sports league for women in American history, which drew nearly 1 million fans annually. In 1945, the league switched to hardball rules and became the All-American Girls Baseball League. Girls' baseball worked as a wartime novelty, but it drifted into extinction in the postwar era.

The postwar era also produced more profound changes in racial relations. In October 1945, Jackie Robinson signed a minor league contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers, confronting head-on racial segregation in America's national pastime and American society in general. The connections between national and racial identities and American sports forged between 1920 and 1945 built toward this moment. American sports and society moved toward profound changes, with an athlete leading the way.

Mark Dyreson

Further Reading


During the decades immediately following World War II, North American society and sports underwent massive changes. Opportunities opened up for those once excluded from the mainstream, either by race or by social class; international tensions were played out on the diamond, field, and court; and technological innovations became widespread, particularly television. Black athletes took their place in professional sports, the Cold War gave added significance to international competition and to the purpose of sports for young Americans, and television allowed fans across the nation to see their favorite teams without leaving home. While the games remained essentially the same, these developments transformed the landscape of sports—whom fans cheered for, what sports they followed, how sports were presented to fans, and how fans viewed athletes.

**African Americans Gain a Place on the Team**

One of the first and most significant changes of the postwar period was the opening of opportunities in professional sports to include African Americans, who had been barred from professional leagues and many college athletic contests, especially in the South, for most of the century. Sports provided the first chance for blacks to participate fully in American life. The long struggle to attain equality would be aided by such ground-breaking athletes as Nat “Sweetwater” Clifton, Larry Doby, Marion Motley, Jackie Robinson, and Kenny Washington.

The first breakthrough came in professional football, which was gaining in popularity but still had a long way to go to catch up with professional baseball and college football. In 1946, the Los Angeles Rams of the National Football League (NFL) signed Kenny Washington and Woody Strode, the first African Americans to play in any premier professional league since the NFL was segregated in the early 1930s. Washington and Strode, both talented athletes, benefited from the efforts of Los Angeles politicians, who made the inclusion of African American players a requirement when the Rams moved from Cleveland to the city-owned Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. Washington, an All-American halfback at the University of California, Los Angeles in the late 1930s, played for three seasons until bad knees ended his career. Strode played for one year before moving on to the Calgary Rough Riders of the Canadian Football League.

Marion Motley also entered professional football in 1946, when Paul Brown, coach of the Cleveland Browns of the All-America Football Conference (AAFC), convinced the star of the wartime Great Lakes Naval Training Station team to forgo finishing his college degree and play professional football instead. Motley and All-American lineman Bill Willis starred for the Browns from 1946 to 1953, helping the team win all four AAFC championships. Motley was the AAFC’s leading rusher with 3,024 yards (2,765 meters), and Willis was named All-League three times. Injuries plagued Motley’s later career, and in retirement, he faced discrimination when he attempted to become a coach, reflecting the still-limited opportunities for African Americans in professional football.

**Jackie Robinson Breaks the Color Line in Baseball**

Jackie Robinson’s entry into professional baseball had a far greater impact on sports than the integration of professional football. Baseball was the unchallenged national pastime and seen as reflection of the core values of American culture.

The major leagues had been segregated since 1884, and the minor leagues since 1899. Politicians, social activists, and East Coast journalists already had been pressing for integration for a number of years. In the immediate postwar period, New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia hinted that if sports franchises did not integrate voluntarily, he might introduce bills in...
Larry Doby, signed by Bill Veeck of the Cleveland Indians 11 weeks after Robinson’s debut, was the first black player in the American League. Like Robinson, he faced many obstacles, but received only a fraction of the press coverage. Other major league teams slowly began to integrate, but as late as September 1953, seven seasons after Robinson’s appearance, only 6 of 16 major league teams had African Americans on their rosters. They were mainly in the National League, where African Americans won five straight Rookie of the Year awards (1949–1953) and seven straight Most Valuable Player titles (1953–1959). The last team to integrate was the Boston Red Sox, whose owner, Tom Yawkey, resisted hiring black players until 1959, when he signed infielder Elijah “Pumpsie” Green.

**Professional Basketball**

In 1946, the Basketball Association of America was formed—renamed the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 1949—and the following season, the league broke the color barrier when the New York Knicks signed Wataru Misaka, a Japanese American. In 1950, Earl Lloyd, Chuck Cooper, and Nat “Sweetwater” Clifton became the first African Americans in professional basketball.
the NBA, when they signed with the Washington Capitols, Boston Celtics, and Knicks, respectively.

All-American Bill Russell signed with the Boston Celtics, becoming the first black basketball star in 1956. Three years later, Wilt Chamberlain joined the Philadelphia Warriors, engaging with Russell in one of the greatest personal rivalries in all of sport.

**African American Women**

Black women achieved success in track and field at historically black colleges during the postwar era. In 1948, Alice Coachman, formerly of the Tuskegee Institute, took first place in the high jump at the Olympic Games in London, capturing the only gold medal in track by an American woman. In the era before passage of Title IX, U.S. Olympic teams relied heavily on African American women. The brightest star was sprinter Wilma Rudolph, who in 1960 won three gold medals at the Olympic Games in Rome.

However, black women struggled to gain recognition in higher-status sports. Tennis star Althea Gibson, known as the Jackie Robinson of the women’s professional tennis tour, won both Wimbledon and the U.S. championships in 1957–1958.

**Sports and the Cold War**

Viewed as an imperialistic affectation by Russian leaders such as Joseph Stalin, sports during the 1950s became a new front for the global competition between democratic capitalism and totalitarian communism. In 1952, the Soviets attended their first Olympic Games in Helsinki, Finland, and the quadrennial event increasingly focused on competition between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The Soviets posted impressive results, especially in women’s events, at a time when athletic opportunities for American women were rare. The American press denigrated Soviet women athletes as “mannish.” Ironically, this opened a cultural space for black women—whose participation in athletics was not seen as an affront to femininity to the same degree it still was for white women—and U.S. teams relied on them to bring home medals.

Soviet gains in the Olympics reflected their focus on events that offered many medals, such as gymnastics and wrestling. In 1956, the combined Soviet men’s and women’s medal totals surpassed that of the United States for the first time. In the eyes of American political leaders, the Olympics provided a chance for nonaligned nations to judge the relative merits of the two social systems by studying the medal results.

Professionalism was a constant subject of contention between the superpowers. Americans claimed that Soviet athletes, many of whom were employed by the army or the secret police, were subsidized, whereas American athletes were true amateurs, albeit often supported by college scholarships. Another concern was charges of mannishness among Soviet female athletes. Contrasts were drawn between Russian women’s androgynous appearance and the more feminine American athletes. As a consequence, gender testing was introduced at the 1968 Mexico City Games.

There also were fears during the Cold War that young people in America were becoming too physically soft, a result of the postwar abundance and consumerism of the 1950s. When studies revealed that American children were in worse shape than their European counterparts—and, potentially, Soviet youths as well—President Dwight D. Eisenhower formed the Council on Physical Fitness in 1956. The council languished until the early 1960s, when President John F. Kennedy bolstered the body with a higher profile and a bigger budget.

As a candidate for the presidency in 1960, Kennedy penned an article for *Sports Illustrated* titled “The Soft American.” He, like other Cold War politicians, believed that America’s struggle against communism demanded a more vigorous citizenry. They believed that youths, in particular, needed to be physically fit in order to excel in life and strengthen the country. Failure to train physically fit youths was viewed as threatening America’s future and undermining the nation’s ability to fight communism around the world.

Even as the U.S. government was promoting physical fitness as a way to strengthen America’s Cold War defenses, it was employing America’s top athletic youths as propaganda tools across the globe. The U.S. Department of State, for example, sent African American athletes on tours of developing-world nations to spread goodwill toward America and to refute Soviet charges that minorities were ill treated in the United States.

**Sports on Television**

The advent of television had an enormous impact on postwar sports, and sports, in turn, helped popularize the new media. Boxing, wrestling, and roller derby were early staples of television in the late 1940s, as all took place in small spaces that were easy to televise. Viewers watched these events on small television screens, often
in neighborhood bars, until they could afford the new technology at home. Other sports, including baseball, football, and golf, also were telecast, helping to increase public interest.

**Baseball**

Immediately following World War II, fans flocked to major and minor league ballparks, but by the 1950s, attendance was beginning to slump, especially in the minor leagues. The decline was attributable to several factors, including competition from other entertainment options, such as television. Baseball did not suit the new medium: There were long gaps between periods of brief action, and the small ball was hard to see on the television screen. In addition, the minor leagues were hit hard when the majors began televising games in their towns. Given the option of buying a ticket to see a team of relative unknowns play or going to a bar or staying home to watch Joe DiMaggio or Ted Williams for free, fans generally chose the latter.

Major League Baseball also was hurt by its inability to negotiate a unified television deal—a move that the federal government opposed on the grounds that it violated antitrust law. While some aspects of major league operations, particularly labor negotiations, were exempt from antitrust law, such exemptions did not necessarily apply to the negotiation of broadcasting contracts. Teams created their own local television packages, which allowed teams in major media markets such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York to negotiate lucrative deals, while small-market teams received far less for television coverage. Congress addressed the problem by passing the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961, which allowed sports leagues to negotiate television contracts as a single unit.

Technological advances in the 1960s helped to make television coverage of spectator sports, and thus the sports themselves, more appealing to audiences. Particularly popular was the use of multiple lenses on television cameras—and later zoom lenses—allowing networks to vary their shots, from a close-up of a catcher giving signals to a wide-angle shot of the subsequent play. With the perfection of instant replay in 1963, networks assigned multiple cameras to cover the action. This allowed viewers to see a spectacular or controversial play from different angles, and helped fill some of the dead airtime during telecasts. Slow-motion technology allowed fans to second-guess umpires, who were handicapped by having to call balls, strikes, and tags in real time. Color television, introduced widely in the 1960s, brought the onscreen image much closer to what could be seen at the ballpark. Combined with other technological advances, this provided a spectacle that was superior in many ways to attendance at a live event.

**National Football League**

No sport benefited more from television than professional football. Still a relatively minor sport in 1945, by 1970, it would eclipse baseball as the public’s favorite sport. Unlike baseball, the action of a football game lent itself to live broadcasts. The action took place in a relatively confined part of the field, so that one camera could focus effectively on the point of collision between the teams, and play followed play, punctuated only by brief pauses while the sides regrouped in huddles.

The 1958 NFL championship game between the New York Giants and the Baltimore Colts, the first season finale to be decided in dramatic sudden-death overtime, fired the public interest in professional football. In public opinion polls, the share of Americans who rated professional football as their favorite sport increased from 21 percent in 1961 to 36 percent in 1972, while the share of those naming baseball fell from 34 percent to 21 percent during the same period.

The NFL’s cause was aided significantly by Pete Rozelle, who became NFL commissioner in 1959. Rozelle had risen from the business side of professional football, and he employed that expertise in his negotiations with the television networks. In 1960, the NFL’s chief rival, the American Football League (AFL), signed a unified television contract with ABC, but when Rozelle signed a similar deal with CBS in 1962, the federal government declared the deal an infringement of antitrust law. Rozelle helped convince Congress to pass the Sports Broadcasting Act, bolstering the NFL’s revenues. Rozelle’s first contract with CBS was relatively modest—$4.65 million—but that figure rose dramatically to $14 million in 1964, while NBC signed a five-year deal with the AFL worth $42 million. After its merger with the AFL, the NFL’s television deal rose to $50 million in 1970.

The NFL, unlike Major League Baseball, decided early on to share national television revenues equally with its constituent teams. Each team received 40 percent of the gate for road games and an equal share of revenues from the television contract. This enabled teams in smaller markets to make money, while spending enough to field competitive teams and sustain fan interest. Rozelle enjoyed much greater control over
league policy than the contentious baseball owners ever surrendered to their commissioner.

The competition for talent between the rival NFL and AFL sparked enormous publicity, as teams threw money at players to lure them to their leagues. When the competition began to threaten the financial health of the leagues, Rozelle negotiated an agreement to merge the two in 1969 under his leadership. Two years earlier, the NFL and AFL already had begun playing a postseason championship, which later would become known as the Super Bowl. The powerful Green Bay Packers of the NFL, led by Coach Vince Lombardi and quarterback Bart Starr, easily won the first two contests in 1967 and 1968, but the American Football Conference (comprised mostly of former AFL teams) gained parity in 1969 when the New York Jets, led by quarterback Joe Namath, defeated the Baltimore Colts 16–7 in Super Bowl III.

National Basketball Association

As Major League Baseball declined and professional football rose in popularity, the National Basketball Association struggled to find its place in American professional sports. Early on, the NBA faced competition from other basketball circuits, such as college basketball, the Harlem Globetrotters, and the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU).

College basketball enjoyed great popularity in the immediate postwar period, and the NBA often was shut out of premier sporting venues such as New York’s Madison Square Garden by college games. The all-black Harlem Globetrotters enjoyed phenomenal popularity after the war, entertaining fans with their showmanship and basketball skills, and even defeating the world champion Minnesota Lakers in 1948. The NBA hesitated to sign top black talent, in part because of a reluctance to compete for their services against Globetrotters owner Abraham “Abe” Saperstein, whose team often played games as part of NBA doubleheaders. The AAU also drained much of the top talent, as its company-sponsored teams arranged high-paying jobs for “amateur” players—often more than they could earn as a professional. Another problem for the NBA was that game scores typically were low and play was rough and tumble, which turned off many fans.

In the 1950s, as the league slowly integrated, the quality of play rose and the game became faster and more creative. Rising revenues enabled the NBA to outbid AAU teams for player talent. The rise of the first NBA dynasty, the Minneapolis Lakers, led by center George Mikan, also helped promote interest in the game. Finally, rule changes, including the introduction of the 24-second shot clock in 1954, sped up the game and made it more television friendly.

The dominant team in the early NBA was the Boston Celtics. Bill Russell joined the club in 1956, teaming up with flashy point guard Bob Cousy under Coach Arnold Jacob “Red” Auerbach. They formed the nucleus of a team that went on to win nine titles between 1957 and 1966. The Celtics played a fast-paced style of basketball and helped attract fans to the sport with their fast breaks and sharp passing. Russell contributed two more titles as a player-coach before retiring in 1969, making the Celtics one of the most successful teams in any sport.

Despite the progress of the NBA, its popularity on television lagged far behind that of baseball and football, and in 1970, its contract with ABC brought in only $2 million. The NBA also had to contend with competition from the American Basketball Association (ABA), formed in 1967, which included several franchises in the Southeast, a hotbed of enthusiasm for college basketball. The ABA signed many top collegians, including Julius “Dr. J.” Erving, and introduced such gimmicks as a red, white, and blue basketball and the 3-point shot. However, the ABA never succeeded in gaining a major television contract. In 1976, the league folded, and four of its teams joined the NBA.

College Sports

Unlike professional sports, American universities and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) were slow to embrace television, fearing that it would cut into their gate receipts. The NCAA opposed the efforts of individual schools to cash in on the bonanza being reaped by the professionals, and, in response to declining attendance in the 1950s, it limited each region of the country to seven televised football games per season into the late 1960s.

Television money began pouring into college sports, but any suggestion of revenue sharing was put aside by pressure from the powerhouse schools. Individual conferences did create such revenue-sharing programs, but marginal schools and conferences missed the gravy train of televised sports. Fans of second-tier institutions had few chances to see their favorite teams play, except in person.

College sports experienced a drop-off in attendance during the 1950s, partly as a result of the college basketball scandal in 1951, when 32 players from seven schools
were indicted for shaving points (purposely winning by less than the point spread established by gamblers). The scandal prompted many big basketball schools to de-emphasize the sport, and conferences prohibited their teams from playing in venues such as Madison Square Garden, whose officials had been implicated in the scandal. In addition, respect for college sports also was hurt by the West Point cheating scandal of 1951 that resulted in 37 players being expelled. Meanwhile, the NCAA gained extensive powers to enforce rules against schools that broke intercollegiate rules.

Even as college basketball languished, college football came roaring back in the 1960s. Several factors—on and off the field—aided this comeback. Offensives became more exciting as the level of play improved when schools in the South, a region with several football powerhouses, dropped their policy of excluding black athletes. And, of course, television made the sport more accessible to millions of Americans who could not attend games in person. Television broadcasts enhanced fan interest in traditional school rivalries and made the postseason bowl games national events.

College basketball had a slower recovery. The NCAA Tournament expanded from 8 teams to 16 in 1951, and soon supplanted the National Invitation Tournament as the main postseason event. However, the NCAA Tournament was not broadcast on a major network until 1969.

**ABC Sports**

In addition to the major spectator sports, television programs such as *ABC’s Wide World of Sports*, which debuted in 1961, brought sports with a marginal fan base, such as track and field and figure skating, to American viewers. Beginning with broadcaster Jim McKay’s voiceover touting the “thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat,” *Wide World of Sports* became an American institution, helping to propel the career of ABC news chairman Roone Arledge, who in 1970 brought the NFL to prime time with *Monday Night Football*.

Television would radically transform the world of American sports, changing the way fans watched sports, and the sports they watched. Now, ball games were accompanied by expert analysis from former players or coaches, which helped demystify the mayhem of football and made it the nation’s favorite sport. Television also would transform sports, encouraging rule changes, such as lowering the Major League pitching mound by 5 inches (13 centimeters) to improve offense in 1969, providing a better spectacle for the audience.

Transportation innovations also had a significant impact on sports. The advent of jet travel made it practical for teams to travel across the country to compete with one another. This had a particularly significant effect on baseball, with its game-heavy schedule. In 1958, just a few years after the introduction of jet travel, baseball became a truly transcontinental sport when the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants—much to the chagrin of their local fans—relocated to Los Angeles and San Francisco, respectively.

**Franchise Movements**

Prior to 1953, Major League Baseball’s geography had been stable for 50 years. The last franchise move had occurred in 1903, when the Baltimore Orioles franchise went to New York, becoming the Highlanders (later renamed Yankees). Since then, the 16 teams (eight in each league) had remained in the same cities in the Northeast and Midwest. St. Louis, Missouri, was both the westernmost and southernmost outpost.

The West and South were clamoring for new teams, but Major League Baseball’s conservative leaders, who were worried about overexposure, looked suspiciously at expansion. This attitude contributed to the most significant team moves in the era. After the 1957 season, Brooklyn Dodgers owner Walter O’Malley announced that his highly profitable team would move to Los Angeles. The same day, New York Giants owner Horace Stoneham reported his team would move to San Francisco. For many fans in New York, the news was devastating—suddenly, they were losing two of their three major league teams. (O’Malley, the main instigator, never apologized.) Both teams desperately needed new stadiums, but the New York City government offered no help or encouragement. By contrast, city fathers in California were eager to cooperate. At the same time, millions of baseball fans in the West were overjoyed, clamoring for tickets and television coverage.
These dramatic changes in the National League pressured the American League to take similar action. In 1961, it was the first league to expand, adding teams in Minnesota (the Twins) and Los Angeles (the Angels). The following season, the National League added teams in Houston (the Colt 45s, later renamed the Astros) and, to address the continuing outrage of New Yorkers, in New York (the Mets). By the end of the 1960s, Major League Baseball had expanded to 12 teams in each league, adding National League teams in San Diego and Montreal and American League teams in Kansas City and Seattle.

**Athletic Revolution**

In the 1960s, American society was rocked by the rise of a youth counterculture that questioned prevailing values and norms. Athletes historically were among the most traditional young people and rarely challenged authority, but even they began to openly challenge some of the basic assumptions of the sports world and the larger society. As part of those challenges, athletes began questioning the authority of coaches, managers, and trainers.

The pioneer of this new spirit was American boxer Cassius Clay, who won a gold medal at the Summer Olympic Games in Rome in 1960 and became heavyweight champion of the world in 1964 after defeating Sonny Liston. Following his title fight, Clay announced that he had joined the Nation of Islam, a Muslim sect that preached Black Power and separatism, and that he was changing his name to Muhammad Ali. In the next few years, Ali turned against the war in Vietnam, one of the most contentious issues of the day. In 1967, he refused induction into the armed services, claiming religious objections to the war. He was convicted of draft evasion, and boxing authorities took away his championship and canceled his licenses to fight in the United States. Ali responded by continuing to box overseas, gaining a worldwide following. In June 1971, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the draft evasion charges. By that time, Ali had been licensed to fight in the United States again but was defeated by Joe Frazier in Madison Square Garden in a bid to regain the heavyweight crown. As a majority of Americans came to oppose the war, opinions on Ali shifted in his favor.

In 1967, Harry Edwards, an assistant professor at San Jose State College, founded the Olympic Project for Human Rights, which sought to use sports to promote civil rights. Its goals included restoring Ali’s title, improving opportunities for African American college athletes, and fighting racism in Rhodesia and South Africa. Edwards was especially critical of Avery Brundage, the American chairman of the International Olympic Committee, whom he branded a white supremacist.

At the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, two of Edwards’s followers, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, won the gold and bronze medals, respectively, in the 200-meter (219-yard) dash. At the medal ceremony, each wore black gloves and raised one fist in a Black Power salute to protest American racism. Brundage immediately suspended the two athletes and sent them home. Many sports fans condemned the protesters, believing that politics belonged on the sidelines; however, supporters saw the demonstration as an important political statement in a setting that already was thoroughly politicized.

**Ball Four**

In 1970, two former professional athletes published books that made public the manipulation of professional athletes by team owners and demythologized the
private conduct of professional sportsmen. The first, former St. Louis Cardinals linebacker Dave Meggyesy, exposed the NFL’s seamy underbelly, including violence, racism, and exploitation of players, in his book *Out of Their League*.

The same year, major league pitcher Jim Bouton, a star of the New York Yankees in the early 1960s, was struggling to stay in the big leagues. In *Ball Four: My Life and Hard Times Throwing the Knuckleball in the Big Leagues*, Bouton opened the locker room door, allowing fans to glimpse the private lives of their baseball heroes. The sight was not pretty, as Bouton chronicled the sexual exploits of major leaguers. He told readers of the stupidity of managers, the cupidity of general managers who tried to cheat players out of a fair salary, and asked whether the career of legendary Yankee Mickey Mantle might have lasted longer if he had not drunk so much.

Reaction against *Ball Four* was severe. Players were angry at Bouton for exposing their private lives. Sportswriter Dick Young called Bouton and co-author Leonard Schecter “social lepers,” and Commissioner of Baseball Bowie Kuhn tried to force the author to admit that the book was fictional. Bouton retired midway through the 1970 season after the Houston Astros sent him down to the minors.

Athletes during the 1960s and 1970s began to reflect the attitudes of the counterculture, which overturned many social conventions. Some changes were superficial, as players began to sport longer hair, beards, and mustaches, while other behaviors, such as protesting the war and fighting for unions, directly challenged one of the tenets of American sports—that athletes remain above politics. These developments both reflected changes in the larger society and aided the transformation of that society.

**Further Reading**


After 1970, sports in the United States enjoyed explosive growth, fueled largely by cultural and technological changes that helped sports become an international multibillion-dollar entertainment industry. With the shackles of segregation and racial prejudice released, African Americans became a dominant presence on many team sports and made significant inroads into sports management. Huge steps were taken toward gender equality, driven by the feminist movement and by the passage of Title IX in 1972. Professional athletes enjoyed enormous opportunities as the once-amateur Olympic sports opened to all competitors and as professionals in team sports secured free agency, leading to an extraordinary escalation in salaries. Sports remained an important arena of Cold War diplomacy through the early 1990s. A new development was the role of performance-enhancing drugs in athletic competition, which tainted the achievements of a number of high-profile athletes.

Financial Growth

No single enterprise demonstrated the growth of sports during this era better than the National Football League (NFL), which completed its merger with the American Football League in 1970. Paid attendance rose from 12.7 million in 1978 to 22.3 million in 2008. The NFL has become the most valuable and profitable team sport organization in the world. In 2009, the average team was worth just over $1 billion.

Developments in media and media technology played an essential role in the growth of all sports, but especially professional football. In 1962, the NFL sold the rights to televise its games to CBS for $4.65 million. By 1977 it was $656 million for four years with three major networks ($6 million annually per team), raised to $14.2 million per team in 1982. The escalation continued. The NFL’s contract from 2004 through the 2011 season was worth $17.6 billion over eight years—an average of $2.2 billion per season—paid by CBS, FOX, NBC, and ESPN. Television rights fees for the league increased 10,000 percent in 40 years, reflecting tremendous audience interest in NFL programming. From 1964 through early 2010, 21 of the 45 top-rated television shows (by percentage of households) in the United States were Super Bowl games. In 2011, Super Bowl XLV was seen by 111 million viewers, the most in history.

While in the shadow of the NFL, other team sports also saw substantial growth. Major League Baseball (MLB) continued the expansion begun in the 1960s, growing to 30 teams by 1998. League attendance increased steadily, from 28,747,333 in 1970 to a high of 79,502,524 in 2007. Televising revenue also generated huge profits for major league clubs. In 2010, FOX was in the middle of a six-year, $2.5 billion deal, while ESPN was paying $851 million. In addition, major league teams reported large revenues from local television contracts, although there is a wide gap between major markets such as New York, where the Yankees made more than $80 million in 2009, compared to the league average of about $30 million. By 2010, the average MLB team was worth an estimated $491 million, led by the Yankees at $1.6 billion.

The popularity of the National Basketball Association (NBA) declined in the 1970s, but rebounded beginning in the 1980s. The average NBA team is worth $369 million at the start of 2011 (down from a record $379 million in 2009). The most valuable franchise in the NBA is the New York Knicks, whose value increased from $296 million in 1998 to $655 million in 2011, despite a series of losing seasons, abetted by the addition of Amar’e Stoudemire. Attendance at NBA games was 21,094,015 or 17,150 per game, down from an all-time high of 21,841,480 in 2006–2007. Fourteen of 30 operated at over 90 percent of capacity. In addition, the league has more than doubled its television rights revenue since 1994, reaching about $600 million a year by 2010 from ABC, ESPN, and Turner Sports.
Hockey and soccer struggled to gain a financial foothold. The National Hockey League (NHL) expanded several times, reaching 30 teams by the 2000–2001 season. Five of the teams are located in Canada, and the remainder are in the United States. Attendance grew from 7,257,670 in 1970–1971 to 20,907,061 in 2009–2010, and 19 of the 30 teams sold 90 percent or more of their capacities. The chief problem for the NHL has been the lack of a lucrative television contract in the United States. The league had a relatively small five-year, $600 million deal with ABC and ESPN, which expired in 2005. When ESPN decided not to renew the deal, the NHL signed with the Versus cable network, which reached far fewer homes. The league did have a small deal in place with NBC to televise select games. In 2007, the NHL signed an agreement to extend NHL coverage on Versus to the 2010–2011 season; Versus paid $72.5 million for the 2007–2008 season and inflationary increases over the next three years.

While youth soccer flourished in the United States, the same could not be said for the professional game. Professional leagues generally suffered from lack of interest and attendance, despite the hiring of such world-class players as Pelé (Edison Arantes do Nascimento), Giorgio Chinaglia, and Franz Beckenbauer in the 1970s to play for the New York Cosmos in the North American Soccer League. (The league ceased operations in 1985.) The sport enjoyed a revival in 1994 when the United States hosted the World Cup. This led to the formation of Major League Soccer in 1996, which later landed a relatively small $160 million television contract with ESPN and ABC. The signing of British soccer superstar David Beckham by the Los Angeles Galaxy in 2007 increased the league’s visibility and popularity. Attendance in 2010 was 4,002,053 or an average of 16,675 per game.

The Olympic Games grew substantially in stature as television made them more accessible, in turn, producing enormous revenue. In 1960, CBS spent only $50,000 to televise the Winter Games from Squaw Valley, California. By contrast, the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles brought in $225 million in television

Ideally suited to television, pro football emerged as a major media phenomenon during the postwar period—so much so that stadiums began installing large-screen video scoreboards to give spectators a clearer view of the action and instant replay. (Sports Illustrated/Getty Images)
revenue. The event made $200 million, the first profitable Olympics since the 1932 Summer Games, also held in Los Angeles. NBC paid $894 million for rights to the 2008 Summer Games in China. Broadcast ratings fell, however, and future Olympics may see reduced offers from television networks.

**Player Empowerment**

As sports leagues grew in economic power and influence, some of that power shifted from team owners to athletes. Historically, professional athletes were bound in service to one team through a contractual agreement known as the reserve clause.

Baseball player Curt Flood challenged the legality of the reserve clause in 1970, when he was traded from the St. Louis Cardinals to the Philadelphia Phillies against his wishes. Although Flood lost his case before the U.S. Supreme Court, fighting the reserve clause became a major objective of the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA). In 1975, arbitrator Peter Seitz effectively struck down the reserve clause when he ruled that players Dave McNally and Andy Messersmith could become free agents and sign with any team. Other professional leagues soon adopted similar policies that allowed for some degree of free agency.

The result was a staggering increase in player salaries. Under the reserve clause, owners could keep salaries low, because players could not change teams, but under free agency, owners had to bid against one another for the top players. In 1969, the average major leaguer made $24,909, which rose to $578,000 in 1990 and to $3,340,133 in 2010. Salaries in other major team sports experienced similar gains.

Unions such as the MLBPA were instrumental in giving players more freedom and financial gain. Most professional leagues in North America now have union representation—which was not the case before 1970—on such collective bargaining issues as salaries, arbitration, and grievances. As these unions became more vocal and powerful, work stoppages became more common. MLB has had eight such stoppages, the most notable a players strike in 1994 that canceled the end of the season and the World Series. NFL players went on strike in 1982 and again in 1987, and an owner lockout canceled the entire 2004–2005 NHL season. The NBA lost 32 games because of a lockout in 1998–1999.

Another by-product of player empowerment was the growing role of sports agents, who help players negotiate contracts and endorsement deals. Agents work on their own or as part of an agency such as IMG, which has a staff of 2,200 in 30 countries. Agents such as Leigh Steinberg in football and Scott Boras in baseball not only helped players gain huge contracts, but they also influenced some teams’ choices in the amateur draft for fear that their clients would not sign with them or would demand too much money.

Meanwhile, many professional athletes gained the opportunity to compete in amateur competitions, notably in the Olympics, as the International Olympic Committee gave more leeway to governing bodies and national Olympic committees to determine the eligibility of athletes. The most conspicuous result of this rule change was the formation of America’s “Dream Team” of NBA players, who have dominated Olympic competition in that sport since the 1992 Barcelona Games.

**Technology**

The impact of technology in sports has accelerated over the past generation, dramatically increasing the reach and exposure of athletes and sporting events through the media. The major networks dominated the production and distribution of live sporting events through the 1970s, but such developments as satellite transmission, cable television, home satellite distribution, and the Internet all combined to erode network dominance. They also allowed new companies and content providers to satisfy the increasing demand for sports programming.

A key innovator was Ted Turner, whose WTCG-TV Channel 17 (now WTBS) in Atlanta was the first “superstation.” The growth of cable television in the 1970s opened up new avenues for sports content, specifically through pay-per-view channels. Providers found that customers would pay extra fees, usually between $30 and $50, to see special events such as championship boxing fights. The match between Oscar De La Hoya and Floyd Mayweather in 2007 recorded 2.15 million pay-per-view purchases and earned $120 million, making it the most lucrative bout in history.

Pay-per-view also became popular with consumers who could not see certain games or teams in their local area. Most major sports leagues, including MLB, the NBA, the NFL, and the NHL, offered out-of-market programming for an additional fee. In 2007, the NFL had about 1.6 million subscribers to its Sunday Ticket programming, which allowed consumers to watch up to 14 games per weekend. The NFL earned around $400 million in gross revenues through its distribution on DirecTV satellite. In a similar way, sports leagues are using satellite radio to reach consumers.
Many individual sports franchises and leagues gained additional revenue and attention from their own media distribution outlets, relying mainly on cable television. Turner bought baseball’s Atlanta Braves in 1976 and broadcast their games nationally on WTBS. In Chicago, WGN also became a superstation and broadcast most games of the Chicago Cubs and other Chicago sports franchises. More recently, such franchises as the New York Yankees and New York Mets established separate cable channels devoted to their teams’ games and other sports programming. The NFL and MLB also launched their own networks over cable and satellite. At the same time, the vast broadcast offering made possible by cable television led to the development of channels dedicated to the two most widely followed individual sports, golf and tennis.

College sports, particularly football and basketball, also benefited from the exposure provided by regular broadcast and cable channels. Contracts between the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the major networks for college bowl games and the “March Madness” Division I men’s basketball tournament—which came to boast a bigger audience for its final games than baseball’s World Series—have generated hundreds of millions of dollars for the organization and participating schools.

The most powerful sports programmer by far, however, was ESPN (which originally stood for the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network). ESPN began as a small all-sports cable channel in 1979, showing programming that the major networks did not want, such as lacrosse and Australian rules football. It grew into the dominant provider of sports entertainment and programming in the world, with estimated revenues of more than $2 billion annually. In 2011, ESPN had at least seven domestic and 25 international television networks, five online entities, two magazines, ESPN Books, and ESPN Radio, and it also provided video on demand, broadband, merchandise sales, consumer products, and event management.

All of these technological developments have given sports fans many more choices in terms of channels, content, and opportunities for feedback. The most recent area of growth is the Internet. In 2007, ESPN launched ESPN360.com to deliver more than 2,500 live sporting events on a yearly basis via Internet broadband technology. As blogs of all descriptions proliferated, those concentrating on sports ranked third, behind politics and entertainment. In just a single month in
2007, Yahoo!Sports brought in more than 24.5 million unique visitors.

The impact that technology had on the games and events themselves is less obvious. Technology became an indispensable part of how games were played and sometimes decided. The most obvious example is the use of instant replay, particularly in the NFL. In 1986, the league approved using replay during games to revisit referees’ decisions, and it played a role in deciding some key games. Today, replay is used during games in the NHL, NBA, and NCAA. MLB traditionally opposed the use of replay, but implemented it late in 2008 for boundary calls and interference for home runs.

Globalization

Financial and technological growth have helped broaden the perspective of American sports to take in the rest of the world. An early focus was Canada. The NHL originated in Canada and had franchises there from the beginning, but other leagues began to catch up. MLB became international with the addition of the Montreal Expos in 1969 and the Toronto Blue Jays in 1977. In the 1990s, the NBA added teams in Vancouver (the Grizzlies) and Toronto (the Raptors). In both leagues, only the Toronto franchises survived.

Beginning in the 1980s, major sporting leagues stepped up efforts to move beyond North America. The NFL began playing exhibition games in Europe, and in 1991, it created the World League of American Football, a ten-team league that played in cities such as Amsterdam, Berlin, and London. The effort was handicapped by the wide popularity of soccer across Europe and the competition of other homegrown football varieties in Britain and Ireland. The league formally ended in 2007.

By contrast, basketball was rapidly becoming a popular game around the world. The NBA aggressively pursued a global strategy, beginning with the media distribution of NBA games, which in 2007–2008 were broadcast in 41 languages to 215 countries. The NBA encouraged the development of strong professional leagues in Europe, which soon were serving as a source of talent for the league.

The NBA also played games in China, which became a big market because of stars such as Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian. When the Houston Rockets with Yao played Milwaukee Bucks and Yi on November 9, 2007, more than 200 million people in China watched the game on 19 different networks, making it the most-viewed NBA game in history. In 2010–2011, the NBA had 84 international players from 38 countries and territories.

In a similar way, MLB opened itself to more international opportunities. Baseball has a longer history of international relations, dating to a tour of Japan by teams in the 1920s. Baseball had become a popular spectator sport in Japan, Mexico, and the Caribbean region by the 1930s. Beginning in the 1990s, the league held occasional regular-season games in Mexico, Japan, and Puerto Rico. In 2010, the major leagues had 231 international players from 14 different countries and territories. In 2006, MLB organized and hosted the first World Baseball Classic, a 17-day tournament involving 16 teams.

Canadians dominated the early NHL. Then, in the late 1970s, the rival World Hockey Association, founded in 1972, began recruiting Europeans. The end of the Cold War substantially increased the Russian and Eastern European presence in the WHA, with star players including Pavel Bure from Russia and Jaromír Jágr from Czechoslovakia. The NHL played several exhibition games and series overseas, but the presence of strong professional leagues in Europe kept the focus on North America.

Other professional sports and leagues increased their international visibility. The biannual Ryder Cup, which began in the 1920s as a competition between the best professional U.S. and English golfers, evolved into a competition involving golfers from the United States and all of Europe and became popular and highly contested. The major championships in professional tennis, including the French Open, Australian Open, and Wimbledon, remained enormously popular international events.

Politics, Diplomacy, and Sport

Sports remained an important means for nations to define their ideological identity, and since the 1950s, the Olympics have been a scene of peaceful Cold War confrontation. The United States and the Soviet Union both worked hard to win the overall medal count to prove the superiority of their economic and political systems. The Soviets gained an edge in this regard at the 1972 Summer Games in Munich, Germany, winning 99 medals (50 gold) compared to the 94 won by the United States (33 gold). Then, in 1976, the Russians won 125 medals to the United States’s 94, while tiny East Germany won more gold medals than the Americans, 40–34.

International conflict during the Cold War strongly influenced Olympic competition in the 1980s. U.S.
President Jimmy Carter pressured the American team to boycott the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow to protest the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan; the Soviets responded by boycotting the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles. Without the two largest contestants present, the customary medal count had much less meaning. When both the United States and the Soviet Union returned to the 1988 Games, the Russians won 132 medals, East Germany won 102, and the United States won 94, in what would be the last Cold War Olympics. By 1992, the Soviet bloc countries had become independent, and the Soviet Union had dissolved.

Performance-Enhancing Drugs

Extraordinary advancements in pharmaceuticals, combined with the age-old search for a competitive edge and the huge sums of money involved in modern sports, led to a series of scandals concerning the use of performance-enhancing drugs in amateur and professional sports during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Among the most widely used drugs were various forms of steroid and hormone treatments, including human growth hormone. Such drugs can increase muscle mass and performance, but also can cause serious mental and physical problems.

The use of such substances emerged first in weightlifting, bodybuilding, and then football, but after 1990, their use was especially prevalent in track and field. Runner Marion Jones won five medals at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. For years afterward, she denied allegations that she had used performance-enhancing drugs. However, in 2007, Jones admitted her guilt to federal investigators. She was stripped of her medals and sentenced to six months in prison. U.S. sprinter Tim Montgomery, former world record holder in the 100-meter (109-yard) dash, also was stripped of his record for his drug abuse.

Jones and Montgomery allegedly received the drugs from the Bay Area Laboratory Cooperative (BALCO) near San Francisco, California. A 2004 investigation—and a book based on that probe, Game of Shadows, by two San Francisco Chronicle reporters—linked BALCO with several other athletes, including baseball stars Barry Bonds and Jason Giambi. The revelations tainted Bonds’s pursuit of the all-time major league home run record, which he broke in 2007, reaching 762.

A congressional hearing into steroid use in baseball was held in March 2005. Several major leaguers testified that they had never taken steroids, but investigators were not convinced. Afterward, MLB stiffened its penalties for steroid use and asked former Senator George Mitchell to lead an investigation into the issue. The Mitchell Report, released in December 2007, reported widespread steroid use in the major leagues for at least a decade. The report linked the use of steroids and human growth hormone to several big stars, including Bonds, Roger Clemens, and Andy Pettitte. A month earlier, on November 15, 2007, Bonds was indicted by a federal grand jury for lying to prosecutors about steroid use. His trial was postponed repeatedly until 2011.

Steroids and performance-enhancing drugs also created headlines in other sports. Former NFL player Lyle Alzado blamed steroid use for the brain cancer that took his life in 1992. Professional wrestling long has been subject to rumors about steroid use, which surfaced again in June 2007, when Chris Benoit of World Wrestling Entertainment killed his wife, son, and then himself in a murder-suicide. Benoit had steroids and other drugs in his system.

Race

Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in baseball in 1947 is considered the seminal moment in race and sports in American history, although further progress was slow at first. By the late 1950s, the proportion of African American players in the NFL and the NBA was much higher than their share of the national population. In 2010, African Americans made up 77 percent of NBA rosters and 67 percent of rosters in the NFL. In MLB, African American players made up 9 percent of the players in 2011, but international (primarily Latino) players accounted for 28 percent.

Today, more than 50 percent of collegiate scholarship athletes in men’s football and basketball are African American. Furthermore, the problem of “stacking” players in certain positions, or keeping them out of key positions (such as quarterback), largely has dissipated. Nonetheless, there still is a wide gap in graduation rates between white and black college athletes.

The remaining inequalities are mainly in the management and ownership of teams. There were no black managers in MLB until 1975, when Frank Robinson became the first African American manager with the Cleveland Indians. In 2009, there were four African American managers, one Asian, and four Latino managers at the start of the season. In the NFL, a 2002 report found that 28 percent of the assistant coaches and 6 percent of the head coaches were African American.
In response, the NFL required that teams hiring new coaches must interview minority candidates. In 2010, six of the NFL’s 32 coaches were African American, including the coaches of both Super Bowl teams. Blacks have been most successful in the NBA, where currently 40 percent of the coaches are African American, yet their average tenure is 1.6 seasons compared to 2.4 for white coaches.

Minorities are vastly underrepresented among owners. Former players Earvin “Magic” Johnson and Isiah Thomas were limited partners of NBA teams in the 1990s, and in 2004, television entrepreneur Robert Johnson became the first African American majority owner of a major sports franchise, the expansion Charlotte Bobcats in the NBA. In 2010, Johnson sold a majority interest in the club to former NBA superstar Michael Jordan. In baseball, businessman Artie Moreno bought the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim in 2003, becoming the first Latino to own a major sports franchise.

The greatest confluence of race and sports in the modern era took place during the murder trial of former NFL star O.J. Simpson. In June 1994, Simpson was charged with the murders of two people, including his former wife, Nicole Brown Simpson. The subsequent trial gripped the nation, splitting public opinion along racial lines. After the trial, a CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll reported that 20 percent of white Americans felt that Simpson was innocent, while 62 percent of black Americans expressed the opinion that he was innocent. Simpson was declared not guilty in criminal court on October 3, 1995, but a civil court jury found him liable for the deaths on February 4, 1997.

In the early part of the era, the dominant sports figure was Muhammad Ali, the world heavyweight champion, who previously had been stripped of his title and sentenced to prison for refusing to support the draft and the unpopular war in Vietnam. His vindication began in 1970 when his boxing license was restored, and it was completed when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned his conviction one year later. In 1974, Ali, by then an international hero, regained his championship by knocking out champion George Foreman in Zaire. Two years later, he successfully defended the title against Joe Frazier in a fight billed as the “Thrilla in Manila.” Ali’s rehabilitation was cemented in 1996 when he was chosen to light the Olympic Flame at the Atlanta Games.

The sports world in the 1990s and after was dominated by other African American athletes, including Michael Jordan, who helped turn the NBA into a major sports and business juggernaut; Tiger Woods, who dominated professional golf like no other golfer of his generation; and Barry Bonds, whose home run record became tainted by allegations of performance-enhancing drug use.

Gender

During the 1970s, there was an explosion in women’s sports, a product of the feminist movement of the late 1960s that promoted opportunity and equality, the fitness craze of the 1970s that advocated health and beauty, the role model of Billie Jean King and other women athletes, and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Title IX stated that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any programs or activities receiving federal financial assistance.” Before Title IX, only one in 27 high school girls participated in sports. Thirty years later, it was almost one in three.

The fight for justice was led by tennis star Billie Jean King, who battled gendered pay inequities in tournaments such as the U.S. Open, helped start the Virginia Slims Tournament, and organized the Women’s Tennis Association, a union of women players. In the “Tennis Battle of the Sexes” on September 20, 1973, Billie Jean King defeated hustler Bobby Riggs in straight sets at the Houston Astrodome before the largest crowd (50,492) ever to attend a tennis match; the match was seen by another 48 million on television. Later, she helped start the Women’s Sports Foundation. King’s successes helped expand the opportunities for female tennis players, who gained rough parity with their male counterparts in the amount of prize money they could win and whose World Tennis Association tour remains among the most-watched individual sports competitions in the United States.

In 1972, the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) became the first national governing body for women’s intercollegiate athletics. It supported an educational model for intercollegiate sports that, unlike the NCAA’s commercial focus, barred athletic scholarships. The idealistic AIAW believed that it would protect young women from exploitative coaches or universities, especially as a backlash against Title IX developed. Because Title IX required parity in school spending on male and female sports, some of the former had to be cut in order to provide more funding for the latter. Male athletes in non-revenue-generating sports—such as gymnastics, swimming, and wrestling—resented the loss of program
broadened opportunities for female athletes. Sports now represents an international multibillion-dollar entertainment industry.

With the Olympic competitions open to professionals, amateurism has become largely an anachronism outside of the NCAA. At the same time, athletes in professional team sports have the freedom to negotiate huge salaries, comparable to those of other entertainers, even movie stars. However, sports also have been damaged by the specter of performance-enhancing drugs, resulting in unfairly achieved records, the loss of public confidence in sportsmanship, and the destruction of certain athletes’ reputations and the negation of their accomplishments.

Brad Schultz

Further Reading


Conclusion: Sports in a Postindustrial Era

The great boom in American sports since 1970 has been a product of many factors, such as the end of racial discrimination, the rise in women’s sports, globalization, the expansion of television coverage, especially cable television, and the growth of the Internet. The end of racial discrimination has opened off-the-field opportunities for African Americans, while feminism and Title IX have broadened opportunities for female athletes. Sports now represents an international multibillion-dollar entertainment industry.
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