



Sports in America

East Germany's state-run *Turn und Sportbund* churns out Olympic medalists with Teutonic efficiency, but for sheer popular interest, the United States is the world's sporting nation par excellence. Sales of athletic equipment have reached the \$15 billion mark, as millions of Americans devote their leisure to tennis, boating, golf, jogging, and other endeavors. Millions more flock to see highly paid professionals at play or watch sports contests on TV. Yet, athletically speaking, the United States has been a late bloomer, lagging a century ago far behind England and Germany. The growth of sports, and how it reflects American aspirations, has increasingly begun to intrigue American scholars, even as some ignore the warning of marathon champion Frank Shorter: "It ruins the whole thing to take it so seriously." Here, editor Cullen Murphy looks at the rise of sports after the Civil War; sociologists David Altheide and Robert Snow gauge the impact of television; and philosopher Michael Novak speculates on what sports tell us about ourselves.



THE OPEN FRONTIER

by Cullen Murphy

Devotees of sports hail a "Golden Age" almost as often as book publishers herald a "major literary event." Still, the present era is as good a contender for the title as any. Endorsements by sports stars can mean money in the bank for shaving cream manufacturers or the margin of victory for ambitious politicians. Professional athletes are themselves amply represented in Washington by, among others, Senator Bill Bradley (D.-N.J.), late of the New York Knicks, and Representative Jack Kemp

(R.-N.Y.), a 13-year National Football League veteran and, according to the *New York Daily News*, "almost certainly the only member of Congress whose district picked him up on waivers."

There are now more professional football teams (28), baseball teams (26), basketball teams (22), and hockey teams (21) than ever before, and Americans spent \$2 billion last year on tickets to athletic contests, using up enough oil in the process to keep New York City running for a year. Attendance at all sporting events is up (to 255 million); so is individual participation in such exertions as jogging (96 million), swimming (85 million), bicycling (66 million), and tennis (41 million).

For their part, many scholars now consider sports a legitimate field of study—if only as a circuitous means of studying something else. Physician Benjamin Rush (1745–1813) once sought to placate critics of school sports, remarking that "the common amusements of boys have no connection with their future occupation." Now, latter-day savants spend their working lives manipulating lambda scores and Gini coefficients as they plot the influence of childhood sports on, say, juvenile delinquency or upward mobility. Their research—"Athletic Dressing Room Slogans as Folklore"; "Machiavellianism Among College and High School Coaches"—is seldom conclusive.

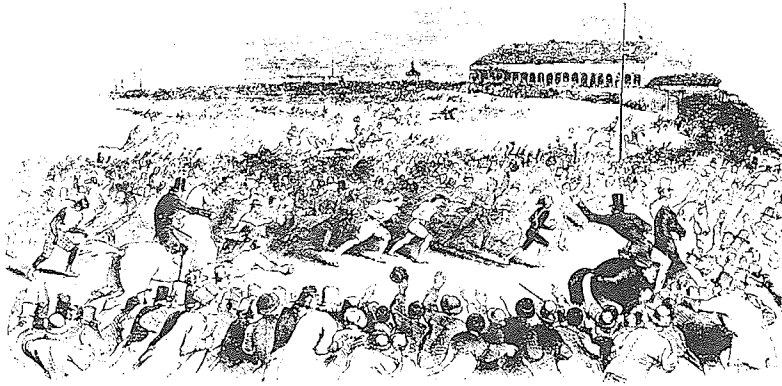
Sedentary Pleasures

On another front, the nation's pollsters report a high incidence of "no opinion" on such topics as welfare reform, SALT II, and the electoral college; yet virtually everyone has a considered position on athletics.

Some Americans are the spiritual heirs of Theodore Roosevelt, champion of "the strenuous life," frenetic hunter, horseman, and footballer. ("You must remember," a friend of his once remarked, "the President is about six.") Yet, one should not exaggerate the size of this ruddy, energetic, sport-for-all-seasons contingent. According to a 1978–79 Yankelovich survey conducted for the *General Mills American Family Report*, only 36 percent of adult Americans subject themselves to regular exercise.

The General Mills report describes the remaining 64 percent as "sedentaries." For some, this is undoubtedly an ideological

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Ten-mile road race at Hoboken, New Jersey, 1845.

posture: Ever since William Bradford, the governor of Plymouth Colony, outlawed "stoole-ball" in 1621, a skeptical minority has looked down on sports as vulgar, narcissistic, or at best a frivolous use of time. The editor of the *American Spectator* is among them. For the past year he has kept a log of unfortunates who have died while jogging "as an omen to all who would don malodorous apparel and join in this madness."

The lion's share of the inactive file, however, is probably composed of fans. The *New Yorker's* portly humorist Robert Benchley was typical of the breed. "Cavalier though he may have been about his own exercise," his son Nathaniel recalled, "he was nevertheless quite interested in other people's." Football and horseracing were his first loves. To keep *himself* in shape, Benchley had a sofa, which he called his "track," and took several turns around it every day, though he insisted that jai alai was really his most demanding sport because the stairs at the Hippodrome were so steep. Benchley's spiritual heirs, who burn off calories by frequently adjusting the TV set on sports-saturated Saturday afternoons, are everywhere.

Whatever the import of such varying attitudes toward sports—and no doubt someone will make the case that they are culturally as significant as race, sex, religion, political party, or class—their roots extend far back in U.S. history.

Early Puritan settlers in New England did not conceive of man as created for a life of fun. In the more tolerant South, Virginia's squires pursued such aristocratic pastimes as horse-racing, though "formal" athletic activities were few.

Americans throughout the colonies managed to eke out what fun they could, but up through the first half-century after Independence, organized sports played on a regular basis did not exist in the United States. Charles Dickens, who toured the new Republic toward the end of this period, claimed to have witnessed no organized recreation except spitting, "and that is done in silent fellowship, round the stove, when the meal is done."

Then, during the 1840s and '50s, U.S. opinion-makers worried that the United States was getting "flabby"—a leitmotif in American letters ever since.* Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson inveighed against the "invalid habits of this country" and Oliver Wendell Holmes, in the first issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, affirmed that such a "paste-complexioned" youth as the United States' had "never before sprang from the loins of Anglo-Saxon lineage."

Leisure and Affluence

Middle-class Americans took heed. Ice-skating, ocean-bathing, and boxing acquired scores of converts. Baseball, which had been played in some form since the earliest colonial days, in 1842 boasted its first real team—the genteel, amateur New York Knickerbockers. Footracing became increasingly popular, and \$1,000 prizes were not uncommon. Men of the cloth, hoping to capitalize on America's new cult of Hygeia, began preaching "muscular Christianity," defined as the duty to "fear God and run a mile in four minutes and a half."

The two decades after the Civil War launched something of a silly season in the United States as fad after imported fad swept the nation: bicycling, croquet, tennis, archery, golf, roller-skating. The diversion of young and old alike to "bicycling" (Americans debated for years over just how to pronounce the word) reportedly cut piano sales in half, and *Scientific American* observed in 1885 that the roller-skating craze had pushed up the price of boxwood, then used for skate wheels, from \$28 to \$120 per ton.

The now familiar team sports grew quickly, attracting tens of thousands of spectators. Baseball, which had developed a more or less standard set of rules before the war, came into its own in 1869 as the Cincinnati Red Stockings, the nation's first

*See, for example, "Echoes of the Jazz Age," by F. Scott Fitzgerald: "Americans were getting soft. There were signs everywhere: We still won the Olympic games, but with champions whose names had few vowels in them—teams composed, like the Fighting Irish combination of Notre Dame, of fresh overseas blood." (Ironically, *F. Scott Fitzgerald* has fewer vowels than *Frank A. Pierkarski*, the University of Pennsylvania guard who became the first All American with a "foreign" name in 1904.)

*A Gibson girl at golf.
Invented by shepherds,
adopted by the rich,
golf came to the United
States in the 1880s.*



Courtesy of The Old Print Shop, New York.

professional athletic team, toured the country winning all 65 of its games against local competition. That same year, the first intercollegiate “football” game pitted Princeton against Rutgers, with 25 men to a side. (Rutgers won, 6 to 4.)

What provided the impetus for the post-Civil War sports boom? It is tempting to say that while Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, sports in the United States owe something to the battlefields of Gettysburg and Antietam. The war effort helped transform the United States into an industrial giant, which in turn fostered a vast migration from rural areas to the great cities.* Physical exercise and impromptu games were part of daily life in the countryside. But the urban masses demanded new and different amusements. Cramped conditions led to spectator sports in stadiums; professionalization of the players was encouraged by numerous wealthy backers. A growing middle class with more leisure time and “disposable income” made sales of sporting equipment—such as the fashionable tricycle, which cost as much as \$300—a significant item in the economy. (Today, money spent on leisure activities in the United States accounts for \$1 out of every \$8 of personal spending.)

By 1880, 90,000 miles of railroad track linked major U.S. urban centers—St. Louis, Cincinnati, Louisville, New York, Bal-

*In 1850, only 15 percent of the U.S. population lived in cities; by 1880, the percentage had doubled, and the actual number had quadrupled to 14 million.

THE BACK PAGE

The rise of sport in the United States is, in part, also the story of the growth of newspapers. Perceptive editors in the 1890s began adding sports pages to their publications for the same reason that, a few years earlier, they had started to run comic strips: to attract the general reader (who, by 1900, had on average only five years of schooling). As Frederick W. Cozzens and Florence Scovil Stumpf point out in Sports in American Life (1953), the tail soon began to wag the dog:

When William Randolph Hearst bought the *New York Journal* in 1895, he began to outdo his rivals in the matter of reporting sports news, and what emerged was the modern newspaper sports section. Where rival newspapers were printing from three to seven columns of sports news daily, the *Journal* doubled, trebled, and quadrupled the space and also began special Sunday issues of twelve pages. During the years 1896 and 1897, Hearst began the practice of signing up sports champions to write for his paper: Hobart on tennis, Bald on bicycling, Batchelder on wheeling, and Hefflefinger, the Yale hero, on football. Experts on his staff included Ralph Paine of Yale on rowing, Charles Dryden on baseball, and Paul Armstrong on boxing. It might be said that Hearst invented the present-day sports page makeup, since today the innovations of 1896 have become commonplace. . . . Hardly any major paper—be it ever so conservative or intellectual—goes to press without a sports page. . . .

There are uncounted examples which could be cited to show how a sports-hungry reading public has prompted invention and innovation in the processes of gathering and disseminating the news. It was in the year 1899 that the first story covered by wireless, a sports event, appeared. The inventor, Marconi, had been experimenting for four years, and had arrived in the United States with his equipment packed in two trunks and eager to have his new wireless tested. The Associated Press hired Marconi and his equipment to report on the international yacht race involving Sir Thomas Lipton's *Shamrock* and the American *Columbia*. . . . By 1913, telegraph lines could be strung direct to the scene of most sports events, regardless of locale, and reports written by a sports editor and his small staff could go direct to newspaper offices.

The first time a complete newspaper page was transmitted by Associated Press Wirephoto from one city to another was on New Year's Eve, 1936, when the *Dallas Morning News* printed a special Rose Bowl Souvenir Edition on the presses of the *Los Angeles Times*. During the Tournament of Roses Parade, and before the game between Southern Methodist University of Dallas and Stanford University, 15,000 copies of the paper were run off.

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timore, Chicago—and railroad entrepreneurs promoted sporting events as a way of boosting their own ticket sales. For that very reason, the Boston, Concord, and Montreal Railroad in 1852 arranged the first intercollegiate crew regatta between Harvard and Yale on New Hampshire's Lake Winnepesaukee. (Harvard won.) The railroads helped make possible the creation of baseball's intercity National League in 1876. To lure passengers, streetcar companies built parks and stadiums on the outskirts of towns; the owners of resort hotels financed race-tracks—like Monmouth Park in New Jersey—to attract paying guests.

In many ways, large and small, the growth of sports mirrored growing U.S. affluence, a phenomenon glimpsed by Mark Twain when he described baseball as the "outward expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming 19th century." And the growth continued. By 1910, Americans were spending \$73 million on sports, not counting capital investment; by the 1920s, even factory workers had enough free time to attend ball games. Boating was once the preserve of the wealthy; today, 34 million Americans spend their off-hours on the water. If any generalization is valid about American sports, it is that activities first patronized exclusively by the well-to-do—from bicycling to tennis—eventually trickled down to Everyman.*

It is primarily the social aspect of sports that has captivated scholars. The spread of public schooling, the rise of literacy, and the growth of mass-circulation newspapers (whose readership had climbed to 15 million by 1900, from 3.5 million three decades before) fast pushed sports into the realm of popular culture. With their informal, partisan prose, sportswriters emerged in the 1890s to assume a place they have yet to relinquish. When the Chicago White Stockings trounced the Pittsburgh Pirates on May 4, 1891, sportswriter Leonard Dana Washburn's story began:

You can write home that Grandpa won yesterday.

And say in the postscript that [pitcher] Willie Hutchinson did it. The sweet child stood out in the middle of the big diamond of pompadour grass and slammed balls down the path that looked like the biscuits of a bride.

*The New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA) went so far as to build municipal polo grounds. By 1937, the WPA had constructed 1,500 athletic fields, 440 swimming pools, 3,500 tennis courts, 123 golf courses, and 28 miles of ski trails. (See Foster Rhea Dulles, *America Learns to Play*, New York: Appleton-Century, 1940.)



Frederic Remington, famed artist of the old West, played football at Yale in 1879. A decade later, he returned to sketch the players in action.

From Harper's Weekly.

Washburn went on to note that Mr. Staley, who pitched for Pittsburgh, "did not have enough speed to pass a streetcar going in the opposite direction."

Early apologists once made the case for athletics by stressing its healthful benefits, just as aficionados of horse flesh claimed they were primarily interested in "improving the breed." But by the turn of the century, sports was popular simply because it was fun.

And yet Americans were aware—self-consciously aware, as they still are—that sports fulfilled important social functions. Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his famous paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in 1893. The western frontier, with its promise of new opportunity and escape since the landing at Plymouth Rock, had been "closed" scarcely a decade earlier. At a time when the United States was undergoing rapid industrialization, sports provided a new safety valve, a new frontier. For recent immigrants, and eventually for women and blacks as well, athletics became a route to public accomplishment and self-esteem. "Who shall say," wrote a prescient historian, Frederic L. Paxson, in 1917, "that the quickened pulse, the healthy glow, the honest self-respect of honest sport have not served in part to steady and inspire a new Americanism for a new century?"