

Sports through the Nineteenth Century

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Sports as we know them are a very recent phenomenon. Not until the end of the nineteenth century did many of the features we take for granted become part of sports. Indeed, our usage of the word is rather new. In the eighteenth century, "sport" would more likely have been used in a phrase like "sporting man," or an individual might have been called a "sport." Both terms were less than flattering, for an individual so designated was likely a rake, a gambler, a man who lived by his wits. By 1900, however, "sports" connoted athletic games played by professionals or highly trained amateurs under clearly spelled-out rules with masses of paying spectators cheering their favorites in specially built stadia. Events themselves were now supported by businesses or institutions (the National League, the sporting-goods firm of A. G. Spalding and Brothers, Yale University, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, for example), reported in mass-circulation newspapers, and evaluated with statistics. So severed from their folk origins had sports become that one game—basketball—had no past at all; it was simply made up in 1891 by one James Naismith, who worked at the Young Men's Christian Association Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts, as a way to keep athletes in shape between the baseball and football seasons. This essay will trace the transformation of sports from folk games to modern spectacles.

The British Heritage

British colonists seem to have played mainly the games they remembered from their ancestral homeland. Of course North America was not "virgin land"; hundreds of thousands of Indians inhabited the continent. Eastern woodland tribes, for example, played a game colonists called stickball ("lacrosse" for the French), yet the British seem not to have adopted this or other Indian games. Perhaps they felt a need to keep intact all of their folk-

ways in this strange land; and perhaps the Indian game was too alien to them, surrounded as it was by the various tribes' customs and observances. After all, Indians often played stickball and other games within a context of sacred dancing, chanting and drumming, shamanism, dietary restrictions, body painting, pipe smoking, and other ritual practices, all part of a distinct religious worldview.

The English played various games on the eve of colonization, and they held a range of opinions as to the proper place of recreation. No single game was typical, but Richard Carew's description of "hurling" in Cornwall at the beginning of the seventeenth century gives us a sense of what was possible. The countryside for miles around could be the playing field, and the teams consisted of entire parishes:

Some two or more Gentlemen do commonly make this match, appointing that on such a holyday, they will bring to such an indifferent place, two, three, or more parishes of the East or South quarter, to hurle against so many other, of the West or North. Their goales are either those Gentlemens houses, or some towns or villages, three or four miles asunder, of which either side maketh choice after the neernesse to their dwellings. When they meet, there is neyther comparing of numbers, nor matching of men: but a silver ball is cast up, and that company, which can catch, and cary it by force, or sleight, to their place assigned, gaineth the ball and victory.

To gain the victory, however, men subjected themselves to brutal competition:

Whosoever getteth seizure of this ball, findeth himself generally pursued by the adverse party; neither will they leave, till . . . he be laid flat on Gods deare earth. . . . The Hurlers take their next way over hilles, dales, hedges, ditches; yea, and thorow bushes, briers, mires, plashes and rivers whatsoever; so as you shall sometimes see 20 or 30 lie tugging together in the water, scrambling and scratching for the ball. . . . (*The Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. Edited by Norbert Elias and Eric

Dunning [1986])

Whichever team carried the ball to its goal—a church, a manor, a parish seat—won the game.

Note that no restrictions on team size existed, that the playing field was the entire countryside for miles around, and that parish membership determined who played on each team. As Carew described it, the game was singularly violent, and such contests no doubt became ready opportunities to settle old

personal grudges or larger community rivalries. Gentlemen arranged the matches, and they undoubtedly offered prizes for the winners, along with a feast for all after the game. These were great men, local nobility or gentry, patrons in the community, whose largesse helped secure the loyalty of their baseborn neighbors. Such games were a social glue, binding men together despite an intensely hierarchical social system. Carew added that hurling helped prepare men for war, for the game required that players know the terrain and anticipate their opponents' movements in order to ambush them. He concluded that hurling "put courage into their hearts, to meet an enemy in the face"; but while the game gave men fortitude, it also left them with bloody heads, broken bones, and injuries that might shorten their days. Though Carew did not mention it, hurling left them with something else—a sense of manhood. Sports like this one seem to have been primarily part of male culture. Implicitly, they defined masculinity—aggressiveness, courage, competitiveness—against femininity. This elemental conception of maleness characterized most sports through the nineteenth century.

Carew wrote his description just as popular recreations were becoming a controversial topic. On the one hand, there was the Renaissance tradition, which celebrated England's national love of play. But on the other, there was the rising tide of Puritanism, a theology suspicious of all worldly pleasures that threatened to divert people from their personal confrontation with God. Just when Jamestown, Plymouth, and Boston were settled the controversy boiled over. King James I issued his "Book of Sports" (1618) to reassure his subjects that the crown still approved of their old entertainments:

Our pleasure likewise is, Our good people be not disturbed, letted, or discouraged from any lawful recreation, Such as dancing, either of men or women, Archery for men, leaping, vaulting, or any other such harmlesse, Recreation, nor from having of May Games, Whitson Ales, and Morris-dances, and the setting up of Maypoles, and other sports. . . . (quoted in Robert W. Malcolmsen, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850* [New York, 1973], 7)

The "Book of Sports" was a rebuke to the Puritans who insisted that the Sabbath must be spent solely in prayer and quiet introspection. Puritans responded that the very recreations the king praised led away from God to superstition and idolatry, to sin and wickedness. So powerful were the Puritans in many parishes that they refused to promulgate the king's decree. They enforced their pious Sabbath, and also banned as "corrupt" and "pagan" the festivals and saints' days of the Catholic and Anglican calendars.

The middle decades of the seventeenth century saw the triumph of Puritanism under Oliver Cromwell, then its demise during the Restoration of the monarchy. The ideological battles fought in England were part of the heritage of those who initially settled the British colonies. Some who migrated were champions of Puritan piety, but others bore the tradition of country recreations, of feast days, cockfights, and ball games.

Early American Sports

In the Old World and the New, Puritans (or Calvinists) were suspicious of excessive worldly joys. Those who envisioned godly communities in the wilderness found human nature inherently untrustworthy, too much leisure dangerous, and work a holy endeavor. Sober religious folk were determined to keep amusements hedged within useful and moderate bounds, which threatened to constrict until they contained nothing at all. Yet others shaped their visions of the New World by the age-old ideal of a leisured paradise. These individuals dreamed of a toilless and bountiful life, and the English heritage of fairs, feast days, and sports became the palpable expression of the leisure ethic. The seeming boundlessness of the New World stirred their imaginations.

All of England's North American colonies inherited the dual-leisure tradition. Many colonial Virginians held Calvinist beliefs in original sin, predestination, and election; many came from pious middle-class stock. On the other hand, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was plagued by people who rejected Puritan hegemony, and by individuals who would rather play than work. But as a general rule, austerity was stronger in the North, while leisure found fuller expression in the South.

Early Virginia was disproportionately settled by men, and a boom in tobacco growing in the 1620s gave the colony the raucous tone of a mining camp. Drinking, gambling, and many of the pastimes of Old England flourished; with social status unclear and land abundant and unfenced, hunting, fishing, and fowling, sports of the privileged back home, could be enjoyed by all. Within a generation, however, a gentry elite had established itself. Often from well-off families, these men controlled the labor of others through a system of indentured servitude, followed by black chattel slavery. By 1700, the southern colonies constituted a highly stratified society, with a planter elite that styled itself after the English country gentry, a middling group of white farmers, and a large body of black slaves.

The early boom economy, with its lack of settled domestic life, encouraged men's willingness to follow bouts of hard moneymaking with interludes of abandon. Later, the rhythms of the plantation, of sowing, tending, and harvesting, encouraged alternating periods of work and idleness rather than regular sustained labor. As the colony settled into a stable, highly stratified pattern late in the seventeenth century, the old English leisure ideal well served Virginia's social alignments. Men in this environment worked hard, but not with the Puritans' regularity, diligence, or sense of the transcendent godliness of labor. For the gentry on both sides of the Atlantic, to celebrate leisure, especially to do so with enormous wagers, was a way to identify themselves as members of a distinct ruling class, regardless of the poverty or ruthlessness competitiveness of their ancestors.

So several factors came together by the beginning of the eighteenth century to help make play a dominant southern value: the English leisure heritage, the erosion of the Calvinist notion of calling among the most influential men in the South, and the rise of the rural gentry to ruling-class status. But one more element was crucial. Black chattel slavery drove the final wedge between labor and leisure. How could men value hard work unequivocally once labor was inextricably associated with degraded, servile blacks? How pretend that work was ennobling, character-forming, even sanctified in a society whose hardest workers were seen as dangerous, half-civilized heathens, capable of nothing but brutish tasks?

For all of these reasons, sports and games became a major preoccupation in Virginia and the other southern colonies. Games and amusements were important to all classes, but by the end of the seventeenth century, the gentry had the time, motivation, and means for great displays of consumption and conviviality. As class lines became distinct during the new century, roughly two or three hundred tidewater families constituted Virginia's aristocracy. Knit together by kinship ties, they shared a gracious life in which leisure lay at the heart of their class style and identity. Horse racing, cockfighting, and hunting were the great gentry passions. Men also eagerly participated in boating, wrestling, fencing, quoits (something like horseshoes), bowling, and cudgeling (fighting with long sticks).

Educated in England like so many young colonial men, the rich and accomplished William Byrd II (1674-1744), for example, participated in the whole panoply of English sporting customs on his enormous family estate at Westover early in the eighteenth century. He played billiards, laid out a bowling green, competed in cricket, ninepins, and skittles. Wealthy Virginians like Byrd seized every opportunity for merrymaking, including dancing, partying,

or gambling over a sociable bottle. Religion and law now buttressed rather than assailed these practices. Ministers of the Anglican church, whose congregations often depended on the patronage of local gentry, offered little resistance to the ethic of leisure, while county courts recognized gambling debts as legally enforceable.

Timothy H. Breen has demonstrated how a horse race among the Virginia gentry facilitated great displays of wealth, personal honor, and patriarchal prestige. The "merry-dispos'd gentlemen" of Hanover County who celebrated Saint Andrews Day in the 1730s with quarter-horse races did so to cultivate social solidarity, vent their competitiveness, and enjoy each other's company. Spectators could observe their betters, provided they "behave themselves with Decency and Sobriety, the Subscribers being resolved to discountenance all Immorality with the utmost Rigour." As Breen points out, however, what made horse races so central to southern culture was the dramatic tension between control and abandon. On the one hand, events should be orderly, reflecting the good harmony of the new society; they should be moderate, not leading men to licentiousness or excess; and they should not become too distracting from productive endeavors. But on the other hand, sport as a vehicle for displays of prowess, wealth, and status encouraged men to compete recklessly, to drink, gamble, and assert themselves as if their very social position, even their masculinity, were in question. Time and again, governors and legislators inveighed against the disorderliness that accompanied horse races, but this failed to stop men from impulsively betting entire fortunes on a single race.

Before long, the southern gentry was building English-style circular tracks; importing thoroughbred horses; retaining breeders, trainers, jockeys, and stablemen (often blacks); and generally making racing a central symbol of upper-class life. The gentry, however, did not monopolize popular recreations. Various groups might mingle at a single event. Just as in the example of hurling by Richard Carew, great men would initiate contests and lesser ones would receive their largesse. Thus Elkanah Watson described a raucous cockfight in Southampton County, Virginia, at which there were "many genteel people, promiscuously mingled with the vulgar and debased" (*Men and Times of the Revolution*; or, *Memoirs of Elkanah Watson*, edited by Winslow C. Watson, 2d ed. [1856], pp. 300-301).

Yet on other occasions, events were more segregated. Observed Philip Vickers Fithian one Easter, "Negroes now are all disbanded till Wednesday morning and are at Cock Fights through the County"; a week later he noticed "a ring of Negroes at the Stable, fighting cocks" (*Journal and Letters of Philip*

Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774, edited by Hunter Dickinson Farish, new ed. [1957], pp. 91, 96). Blacks even continued some of the games of Africa in the slave quarters. Moreover, poor and middling whites claimed leisure space for themselves. They held their own races, cockfights, and bear baits; they hunted and fished for pleasure as well as game; they even staged their own ferocious, eye-gouging battles. Nonregular working rhythms of plantations, farms, and market towns enabled individuals to find time for such activities. The hours taken in the middle of work could expand to days for annual events such as the "Public Times," held every spring and fall for court and assembly sessions at the county seats. Mid-eighteenth-century Williamsburg, for example, grew to three times its normal population during these events, as individuals watched or participated in horse races, plays, dancing, fiddling, acrobatics, wrestling, and other pleasures.

Whether describing them as leisure-loving or lazy, many commentators have declared that southerners developed a distinct regional ethic, one that rejected labor as the all-consuming goal of life. When they esteemed commerce and enterprise at all, it was less because piling up wealth contained religious or moral value than because productivity facilitated the good life. While gentlemen-planters were not a hereditary aristocracy, they took their cue from great landed Englishmen, embracing sociability, gracious living, and personal polish as core values. Conspicuous consumption rather than rational savings was the hallmark of the region, because displays of luxury and fine living were markers of a man's status in society. Above all, we must not view the southern ethic as aberrant or unique. Irregular working rhythms, conspicuous display, love of finery, and games and sports all had deep roots in Western cultures. The compulsion to work steadily and regularly, to make leisure a subordinate value accepted only for its ability to increase one's capacity for labor, and to divide work and play into separate, compartmentalized realms were the novel ideas.

The settlers of New England and the middle colonies were also heirs to the dual-leisure tradition. Yet the North proved a more austere climate for traditional recreations. About 1627, Thomas Morton, a renegade from Puritan society, led a band of like-minded settlers to the edge of Plymouth Colony, and there defied his pious neighbors. William Bradford (1590-1657), governor of Plymouth, accused Morton of atheism and paganism—categories that Puritans tended to conflate. Bradford described the renegades' revels: "They also set up a maypole, drinking and dancing about it many days together, inviting the Indian women for their consorts, dancing and frisking together like so many fairies, or furies, rather . . . as if they had anew revived and celebrated the feasts of the Roman goddess Flora, or the beastly practices of the mad

Baccanilians" (*Of Plymouth Plantation: 1620-1647*, edited by Samuel Eliot Morison [1952], pp. 205-6). Morton taunted his Pilgrim neighbors, and they finally responded; in 1628 they cut down the maypole, arrested Morton for selling arms to the Indians, and shipped him back to England in irons.

Generally, however, conflicts over popular recreations took less dramatic forms. In 1621, Bradford had to deal with some new settlers who objected to working on Christmas Day (the Pilgrims of Plymouth, indeed, the Puritans in general, considered Christmas celebrations part of the pagan hangover of the Catholic church). The governor decided not to force these people to work against their consciences, but when he and the others returned from their labors that day; they found the newcomers "in the street at play, openly; some pitching the bar, and some at stool-ball, and such like sports." Bradford took away their sporting toys, not because they played, but because they did so openly: "If they made the keeping of it (Christmas) a matter of devotion, let them keep their houses; but there should be no gaming or revelling in the streets" (p. 97). At least the appearance of a godly community would remain, and the diligent not be tempted from their labor.

Dissenting Protestants, Puritans among them, did not object to all recreations. They allowed innocent amusements like simple ball games, played in moderation; hunting and fishing provided food; martial sports like cudgeling or swordplay taught skills useful to the defense of the settlements; sociable activities like cornhuskings, or spinning or quilting bees, were encouraged. But they drew the line at recreations that violated the Sabbath, encouraged passion, or smacked of the old pagan excesses. The true test of recreations was their usefulness; proper leisure helped people live righteously by serving useful ends, ends that included refreshing them for work. Thus, even as he condemned profane or promiscuous dancing, Increase Mather stated, "The Prince of Philosophers has observed truly, that Dancing and Leaping, is a natural expression of joy; So that there is no more Sin in it, than in laughter, or any outward expression of inward Rejoycing" ("An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing," [1684] excerpted in Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson, *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings*, vol. 2 [1938], p. 411).

This spirit of moderation grew out of the Puritans' dominant theology, Calvinism. After the fall from Eden, they believed, all humankind was tainted with sin. In his mercy, God, through Christ, saved a small number from eternal damnation. In other words, the Lord had predetermined the fate of all people, saving a few for reasons only He understood, damning the rest. Since their fates were predestined, it followed that earthly efforts had no impact on people's futures. Nor could one know for sure whether one was among the elect. Still, through constant self-scrutiny, an individual might discover evi-

dence of Christ's grace. Leading an upright life according to God's laws was a sign—albeit a tenuous one—of salvation.

For the Puritans, an upright life meant far more than merely observing ritual forms. Their idea of "calling"—that laboring diligently in one's worldly occupation was a religious observation—infused daily business life with religious significance. The hardworking farmer or tradesman did the Lord's bidding as surely as the writer of sermons. Work was pleasing to God and it followed that success in one's earthly endeavors might just be a sign of inner grace. But even while individuals strove to succeed in the world, they must never overvalue the material fruits of success. Signs of salvation, not the good life, were what one sought in pursuing one's calling. Even as men's labor bore fruit, they must never cherish the comforts of life; their eyes must always be on the Lord. Above all, the bond between piety and labor meant that play could never be unequivocally valued in its own right. Whereas southern life turned men away from seeing work as a transcendent value, northerners eyed leisure with suspicion.

It would be a mistake, however, to interpret northern ideas about sports, play, and leisure purely from the Puritan viewpoint. A more accurate depiction would see this cluster of Protestant ideas as a presence that sometimes dominated the northern colonies, sometimes was challenged by less-than-pious groups, but always made itself felt. In Massachusetts and New England, but also among the Dutch Calvinists of New York and the Quakers of Pennsylvania, ideas like calling and worldly asceticism tempered people's commitment to play. Moreover, the Protestant ethic did not simply fade with the seventeenth century, but rather washed over communities in successive waves. The various religious awakenings that swept through people's lives from the mid-eighteenth through the early nineteenth centuries always contained a powerful element of Protestant self-control, an austerity that cast suspicious glances at those too immersed in the passions of the world. Indeed, even a deist and man of the world like Benjamin Franklin could not escape the earnest spirit of improvement, the suspicion of frivolity, that was his Protestant heritage.

Nonetheless, the English leisure tradition survived in the North: neither harsh frontier conditions nor Puritan hegemony obviated pleasures of the flesh. Crossroads taverns, community gatherings like elections or muster days, and marketing times tied to rural life were all loci of traditional games. What failed to emerge out of the old folkways was an ethos of leisure conferring social rewards, a cultural challenge to the Puritan work ethic, a way of life like that of the southern gentry which assumed that humans worked to play rather than played so they might work.

One exception to this rule emerged in the eighteenth century in cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Here an urban gentry began to form, consisting partly of British colonial officials and military officers, partly of newly prosperous merchants, and partly of men of landed wealth who lived and governed from the city. In Philadelphia, for example, such a group rivaled the pious Quakers in political clout. The Philadelphia gentry forged group identity through common membership in such organizations as the Mount Regal Fishing Club, the Dancing Assembly, the Gloucester Hunting Club, and the Jockey Club. In New York, too, balls, plays, dances, horse races, and cock-fights were important venues where the new urban elite came to identify with each other. But not only the elites of growing cities were active in leisure pursuits. Tavern keepers, to attract customers, tradesmen and laborers among them, became pioneer promoters of recreations. They provided dart boards and bowling greens; they brought bulls and bears to confront pit bulls; they built rings for cockfights; and they held the stakes for various forms of gambling. By the mid-eighteenth century, then, cities were becoming the focus of a whole new realm of leisure. Here, where individuals were most oriented to the marketplace, recreations took their first steps toward commercialization.

Perhaps it is best to speak of various sporting heritages during the colonial era. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, sporting events at their most organized might attract a few thousand spectators, rich and poor, mostly white, mostly male, watching thoroughbreds, for example, race for high stakes. Such an event would likely pit two local elites against each other, would be held on a track with grandstands built by a rich jockey club, would even be an annual occasion. But at the other extreme, and certainly more common, would be events centered in the countryside and small towns, where the vast bulk of the population lived. Most common were activities like hunting and fishing, where leisure and labor cannot even be distinguished from each other. The most likely form of "sport" might be simple ball games, played according to uncodified rules with available equipment in pastures or clearings. Folk games and recreations were part of communal preindustrial life; they grew out of face-to-face relationships, and expressed the tensions and cohesiveness of particular localities.

The Antebellum Era

In June 1802, the grand jury sitting in Philadelphia received a petition against Hart's racecourse, a local institution: "This English dissipation of horseracing may be agreeable to a few idle landed gentlemen, who bestow more care in

training their horses than educating their children, and it may be amusing to British mercantile agents, and a few landed characters in Philadelphia; but it is in the greatest degree injurious to the mechanical and manufacturing interest, and will tend to our ruin if the nuisance is not removed by your patriotic exertions" (quoted in John Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia 1609-1884* [1884], p. 940). The petition was signed by 1,500 mechanics and 1,200 manufacturers, which in that era generally meant craftsmen who worked in their homes or shops with the aid of families and perhaps an apprentice or journeyman.

The petition was filled with code words: Dissipated idle gentlemen who train horses rather than educate their children will ruin manufacturers without the jury's patriotic exertions. Here is a classic example of republican ideology, that set of ideas that helped drive the colonies to rebel against England, and to form a virtuous commonwealth. On one side, the idleness and dissipation of merchants and landed characters; on the other side, producers motivated by the spirit of hard work. Selfishness, luxury, corruption, in the republican lexicon, versus self-restraint, virtue, communal improvement. The racetrack became a symbol of a serious social and ideological schism.

Sports and leisure, as we have seen, had always had a conflicted history. During the revolutionary era, the Continental Congress outlawed games, sports, the theater, all of the usual amusements, as unfit for a virtuous people embarking on independence. Horse racing returned after the war, but the problem of proper versus improper amusement sharpened during the nineteenth century. The old republican tradition that had emphasized individual self-restraint in the name of communal welfare lived on long after the revolution. But as American society increasingly came under the sway of capitalism and the liberal ideology that accompanied it, sports and leisure were not immediately liberated from old prejudices. On the contrary, the newfound freedom of Americans to transact business during the antebellum era was accompanied by singularly stern cultural strictures that demanded rigid adherence to tough rules of personal conduct.

Historians have documented a transformation in the American economy that occurred largely during the first half of the nineteenth century. Agricultural production shifted from an orientation toward semi-subsistence and local consumption to market production. Especially with the opening of new lands, the development of inland waterways, and the building of new transportation systems, increasing numbers of farmers produced staples that they sold in national and international markets. Even more important for our purposes, cities burgeoned as centers of trade and manufacturing, while the

methods of making goods were transformed. Machine production was part of this process, as was the increasing concentration of productive property in fewer hands, and the growing pull of the marketplace.

The Philadelphia petitioners against Hart's racecourse represented the old, preindustrial economy, in which apprentices learned a trade, and, with luck, finally became skilled master craftsmen and proprietors of their own shops. This system was part of a household economy that produced goods for local markets. Work and family were often contiguous: apprentices lived in the master's houses, family members labored alongside the head of the household, and this patriarchal extended family was seen as the font of public order.

The new system was much more recognizably part of the modern capitalist order. Old words like apprentice and journeyman hung on, but working relationships were transformed: employers paid wages or piece rates (as low as they could get away with) to individuals who sold their labor for as much as they could command. Trades were rationalized, the size of firms expanded, and the possibilities of workers ever becoming independent property owners diminished. One tendency that accompanied these changes was the destruction of old craft skills; it was to owners' advantage to break down the production process into simple tasks that required cheap, easily replaceable workers. Moreover, entrepreneurs now found themselves much less burdened with fellow feeling for their employees; young workers lived in boarding houses until they married and started their own families. The new order was based far less on customary or paternalistic relationships, much more on contractual ones.

This new organization of society—of productive relationships—had ideological implications. The old Protestant ethic was very serviceable in the new order. Protestantism's emphasis on stable, sober, dependable behavior was useful to a society whose organization of work increasingly demanded time, thrift, and intense specialization of tasks. Sheer productivity for its own sake had religious sanction, while landlords, speculators, and merchants were sometimes seen as manipulators of markets, accumulators who produced nothing while living extravagantly. For the new middle class, delayed gratification and moral certitude were the cornerstones of society. The economies and social relationships in different parts of the country were not all transformed at once; but the total result, certainly by the middle of the nineteenth century, was a thoroughly changed society. By then, national markets, mass print media, telegraphy, steamships, railroads, voluntary associations, and, above all, a powerful consensus of values bound most white, northern, Protestant middle-class Americans together. For want of a better term, we can

label the ascendant national culture that accompanied social and economic change Victorian.

Like the Puritans, Victorians would never argue that wealth was a sure sign of moral worth, but they did believe in a connection, or in the sociologist Max Weber's term, an "elective affinity" between prosperity and good morals. Capitalists and Evangelicals—often the same people—feared idleness, craved regularity, practiced self-control, and idealized usefulness. The millennial hopes of preachers, the belief in eternal life, in spiritual perfectibility, were as real to the saints as the profits that accrued from temperance, thrift, and hard work. Choosing Christ and controlling social stress were part of a single process; converting employees saved souls and secured a reliable labor force; establishing urban missions helped prepare for the millennium and assured a stable business climate. Business and religion were bound together with an earnest tone of moral certitude.

Victorianism, again like Puritanism, contained seeds of repression for popular recreations. Whereas for the Puritans a sociable dram or a local lottery for a good cause were acceptable, the new Evangelicals often condemned such practices as sinful, insisting on an unprecedented level of asceticism. Virtually every recreational outlet was condemned at one time or another, from cockfighting to checkers, from horse racing to croquet. All leisure activities potentially fostered the evils of drinking, gambling, swearing, idleness, and Sabbath breaking. Declared a Congregational magazine, the *New Englander*, in 1851, "Let our readers, one and all, remember that we were sent into the world, not for sport and amusement, but for labor; not to enjoy and pleasure ourselves, but to serve and glorify God, and be useful to our fellow men." In a similar vein, William A. Alcott warned youthful readers in his *Young Man's Guide* (1833), "Everyman who enjoys the privilege of civilized society, owes it to that society to earn as much as he can, or in other words, to improve every minute of his time. He who loses an hour or a minute, is the price of that hour debtor to the community. Moreover, it is a debt which he can never repay." Even in the West, where the constraints of civilization supposedly were left behind, and the South, where the slave system encouraged an ethic of leisure, Victorianism found staunch adherents, and the wilder the sports, the more strenuous reformers were in suppressing all that stood in the way of the City of God and the progress of man.

Yet there were powerful countertrends. The same transformations that gave rise to the Victorian ethic of hard work and sober self-control also created an environment potentially conducive to popular recreations. By divorcing work from the extended family of shop and farm, the new capitalist order

freed men and women not only to labor as best they could, but also to spend their leisure time according to their own lights. One of the constant refrains heard from antebellum reformers regarded the dangers of young people roaming the streets, free to go to theaters, gambling houses, dance halls, bars, and other places of recreation.

By midcentury a distinct working-class subculture had emerged in American cities, especially New York, and for young unmarried men, sports were an important part of that subculture. A cluster of images captures the scene: the volunteer fire companies where men gathered to drink, play cards, and occasionally display their heroics as firefighters; ward-bosses in city politics who knew how to distribute largesse and secure elections with the aid of ballot-box stuffers and strong-arm enforcers; the Bowery in New York (and little Bowerys in other cities) where theaters packed in the crowds for melodramas, and working-class men donned the distinctive dress of the "Bowery B'hoys"; taverns where men treated each other to round after round of drinks, and where sporting events like cockfights, bare-knuckle boxing matches, or bull baits were arranged or staged.

Beyond the working-class and immigrant sporting underground, there were other factors contributing to the rise of sports. Steam-power printing, telegraphy, and the penny press all could be used to disseminate sporting news. America's first sporting magazine appeared in the second decade of the nineteenth century, and there were three new magazines in each of the next three decades, four in the 1850s, and nine in the 1860s. The *Spirit of the Times* became a main source of sporting news beginning in the 1830s, but before long, cheap working-class daily newspapers like the *New York Herald* covered sports with depth and regularity. Steamboats and railroads carried runners, or boxers, or thoroughbreds to matches; manufacturers marketed cricket bats, billiard tables, and archery equipment; telegraph lines flashed news of important contests. Perhaps most important, cities grew at an unprecedented pace during the antebellum era—nine had populations over 100,000 by 1860—creating a new potential market for popular entertainment like sports. Although America remained predominantly rural, cities, as nodes of production and distribution, had growing cultural influence.

Increasingly, recreation was transformed into entertainment, a sort of cultural goods to be purchased with earnings. Minstrel shows, melodramas, popular museums like P. T. Barnum's in New York (1842), circuses, pleasure gardens, and sporting events all became cultural commodities. Control of thoroughbred racing in this era passed from the hands of landed gentlemen to promoters who organized yearly meetings and standardized rules; boxing

came into its own, as fight organizers coined money chartering trains and boats to transport fans to the scenes of battle; and by the 1850s the old folk game of baseball developed clubs and leagues that began charging admission to games and paying players. Pedestrianism, as foot racing was called, came as close as any sport to the modern athletic events of today. Wealthy socialite John Cox Stevens initiated the commercialization with a challenge in 1835 to pay \$1,000 to the first man to run ten miles in under an hour. Roughly 30,000 spectators showed up at the Union Race Course on Long Island to watch a field of runners take up the challenge. Over the next twenty-five years, crowds up to 50,000 would cheer as runners competed for purses as large as \$4,000. In an era when the average laborer earned something around \$200 a year, the contests were irresistible to young athletic men, some of whom made a living traveling from race to race.

But athletics on this scale remained rare. Some sports, harness racing prime among them, displayed important "modern" characteristics—standardized rules, the keeping of statistics, regular schedules, and so forth—and some events attracted massive coverage and paid athletes handsomely. The \$10,000 championship prizefight between Yankee Sullivan and Tom Hyer in 1849 is a good example. But mass spectator events remained rare. Professionalism was still unusual, profits secondary, organizations informal, and scheduling irregular. Sports as a commodity were in their infancy, far from the regular, profitable, well-managed, repeatable spectacles of the twentieth century.

Voluntary association more than money motivated this early stage of sports development. This was certainly true of most events in which working-class men watched or participated. Often their contests played out ethnic rivalries, especially Irish versus native-born. Similarly, young Germans who migrated to America after the abortive revolution of 1848 brought their Turner societies over from the old country. These organizations (the name comes from *Turnerbund*, literally "gymnastic society") blended nationalism, anticlericalism, and utopian socialism. As part of their program of universal education to prepare men for political and social democracy, the Turner groups placed great emphasis on gymnastic training and sponsored competitions of athletic skill. Similarly, Scottish immigrants in the 1850s replicated their track-and-field events in the Caledonian games. In these and other cases, ethnic groups helped perpetuate their identity through sports, even as outsiders sometimes attended competitions as spectators. Sports, then, could become a point of solidarity for foreign groups in an alien environment.

Men of the upper class, too, organized new sporting institutions. Metropolitan, university, and union clubs both symbolized and buttressed class

prerogatives, reinforcing elite styles of dress, speech, and values, while creating new social and business networks. In the two decades before the Civil War, cricket, racquet, yacht, and rowing clubs began to spring up as exclusive men's organizations. The ubiquitous John Cox Stevens, for example, founded the New York Yacht Club in 1844, which attracted some of the city's leading men. When Stevens's yacht, *America*, defeated eighteen British rivals in the first America's Cup Race (1851), other cities quickly organized their own yacht clubs, and these spun out webs of social activities, including balls and cruises. Boat clubs, crew teams, and regattas arose at prestigious Ivy League colleges, and in 1852, Harvard and Yale oarsmen competed in the nation's first—albeit informal—intercollegiate athletic contest. The embryonic alliance between sport and capitalism is especially clear in this example, because the Boston, Concord, and Montreal Railroad sponsored the regatta and paid all of the expenses as a business promotion.

Baseball also first became organized around the club ideal, and we still refer to multimillion-dollar businesses as "ball clubs." Folk versions of baseball had been around for centuries, but in 1845, the New York Knickerbocker Baseball Club became America's first organized team. Merchants, professionals, clerks, and a handful of tradesmen were members of the club during its first fifteen years. By 1858, sixty teams affiliated together as the National Association of Base Ball Players. In part their goal was to prevent the sport from becoming a vulgar commercial spectacle. Early on, clubs tried to assure the social status of the game by excluding men lower down on the pecking order, by keeping the game open mainly to society's upper half. Certainly every mechanic and laborer could not take off whole afternoons for practice as the National Association clubs did, nor could they afford the elaborate banquets that followed games. But a ball, a bat, and an empty lot were easily procured, and before long, firefighters, policemen, teachers, bartenders, and others organized their own clubs all over America. Some of the working-class teams were so good they began charging admission to their games and paying players. Betting, drinking, and boisterous cheering often accompanied these games. Distasteful as the low-caste game was, amateur clubs quietly conceded to professionalization when they purchased the services of "ringers."

By the Civil War sports had grown more prominent than ever in American life. Some of the games we recognize in the twentieth century—baseball, boxing, track and field prime among them—were no longer purely folk events. An occasional horse race, especially one pitting a thoroughbred from the North against one from the South, might even attract as many as 50,000 people and dominate the news for a few days. But if sports proliferated in this era, they

were neither highly organized nor well integrated into the larger society. The permanent arenas, regular schedules, massive coverage, compulsive record keeping, and high salaries we associate with modern sports were largely missing. Above all, still absent was an ideology of sports appropriate for a modern, capitalist, bourgeois society.

As the antebellum era came to a close, however, the outline of such an ideology was beginning to appear. The same nationalism that encouraged some to define Americans' mission as virtuous hard work caused others to wish for a nation of vigorous, physically fit men. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., was one who sounded the alarm: "I am satisfied that such a set of black-coated, stiff-jointed, soft-muscle, paste-complexioned youth as we can boast in our Atlantic cities never before sprang from loins of Anglo-Saxon lineage . . ." ("The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table," *Atlantic Monthly* 1, no. 6 [1858], 881). Like many others of the northern intellectual and social elite—Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Catherine Beecher, Horace Mann, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman among them—Holmes began calling for vigorous exercise for American youth. But these early sports advocates were careful to denounce raucous dissipations. The spirit of improvement, the progress of the race, the innocence of play were their ideals.

An avant-garde of clergymen, journalists, and reformers began the chant. Henry David Thoreau believed that "the body existed for the highest development of the soul" (Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, eds., *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, vol. 1 [1962], p. 176), so he advocated not stuffy exercises like calisthenics, nor artificial games like baseball, but activities that immersed one in nature, such as walking, swimming, and rowing. Drawing on romantic faith in human perfectibility, men like Walt Whitman began to view the body as divine, and reformers like the Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing advocated wholesome recreations as part of the larger reform agenda. These early "muscular Christians," as they were sometimes called on both sides of the Atlantic, could advocate recreations with missionary zeal. Declared Frederic W. Sawyer in his influential *Plea for Amusements* (1847): "The moral, social, and religious advancement of the people of this country, for the next half century, depends more upon the principles that are adopted with regard to amusements generally, and how those principles are carried out, than to a great many other things of apparently greater moment" (p. 291). Sawyer argued that moral amusements could displace immoral ones—gymnasiums, for example, supplanting smoke-filled billiard halls. While more orthodox individuals scoffed at such suggestions, the tide seemed to be running in favor of liberal reformers and religionists. In colleges, the sons of America's elites

began to participate in the earliest intercollegiate athletic competitions. Amherst, Brown, Yale, and Williams led the way. But in the popular imagination, too, bodily health took on new importance. The *Cincinnati Star* in the *West*, 6 December 1856, for example, declared it as sinful to neglect the body as the spirit or intellect: "God made man to develop all his faculties to the highest possible degree—to stand erect with broad shoulders and expanding lungs, a picture of physical and moral perfection."

These first glimmerings of modern sports were highly gendered—broad shoulders and expanding lungs were "manly" ideals—and while some reformers like Catherine Beecher recommended athletics for young women, the overwhelming emphasis of these early years was on sports for men. In important ways, the language of the new athletic advocates was infused with the rigid gender definitions of bourgeois culture. Sports, it was said, taught independence, self reliance, courage, discipline—qualities valued in the rough-and-tumble world of business. In domestic ideology, so prominent in the popular culture of this era, women were to domesticate men, but this civilizing process, some feared, threatened to blunt masculine assertiveness in the social, political, and economic spheres. The same society that produced unprecedented quantities of consumer goods associated consumption with femininity and self-denial with manliness. Commercial success, love of luxury, soft living threatened to overwhelm masculine virtues in a sea of goods; spartan and manly sports, a few advanced thinkers seemed to be suggesting, might offer a way out of this trap. Advocating sports in the schools, the *New York Spirit of the Times* declared on 20 June 1857: "The object of education is to make men out of boys. Real live men, not bookworms, not smart fellows, but manly fellows."

So the antebellum era wove several strands of sporting life. In rural areas, gentry sports and country amusements continued. The growing cities witnessed the flowering of a working-class culture that highly valued athletic prowess, especially when expressed in the form of ethnic rivalry. While the dominant chord of middle-class Victorianism, especially among Evangelicals, was in opposition to leisure and play, new voices were just beginning to be heard that advocated sports in the name of bourgeois ideals, and as a way to reform the unwashed masses. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, then, the very structure of society, with its emerging classes, strict division of labor, glimmerings of a consumption ethic, and sharp separation of work time from nonwork time, opened up new opportunities for sports. And a justification for sports began to emerge, clustered around virtuous, bour-

geois manliness: gymnastics gave men endurance, baseball promoted discipline, cricket taught self-control. In coming decades, such ideas would flood the nation.

Sports in the Gilded Age

In 1810, a free black American, Tom Molineaux, fought for the boxing championship of all England. Britons feared the prowess of this foreigner, yet were reassured by the skill of their champion, Thomas Cribb. The fight proved a great one, and the English press covered the event in minute detail. In America, on the other hand, the bout was scarcely noted. While boxing was the "national sport of England," few people on these shores had ever even heard of prizefighting; there simply was no interest in such an event here. Yet half a century later, when an American of Irish extraction, John C. Heenan, ventured to England to fight for the title against Tom Sayers, the American press exploded with coverage. Newspapers might condemn the illegal match (all prizefighting was illegal in this era), but they covered it round by round.

The interest in sports that characterized the antebellum era—an efflorescence of working-class events like boxing matches that at once expressed a class sensibility and ethnic divisions; the rise of baseball initially as a genteel middle- and upper-middle-class game; the very first intercollegiate athletic competitions between boys from elite schools; and harness races, which Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., praised for their democratic virtues, and which were distinctly modern in their emphasis on fixed rules, record keeping, and equality of entry—grew at an unprecedented pace during the Gilded Age. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, sports as we know them today had been born. And that birth was attended by the whole range of modern institutions we associate with urban-industrial America, bureaucratic structures, corporate organizations, capitalist ideologies, urban development.

By bringing men together in enormous numbers, the Civil War afforded unprecedented opportunities for sports. Between battles, men boxed, played baseball, and raced horses, often for the first time in their lives. More important, the war speeded the transformation of American society. The nation's capacity for manufacturing and distributing goods expanded, communication and transportation networks thickened, the organizational structure of society grew more sophisticated. As American capitalism matured with the century—as the division between those who owned the means of production and those who labored for wages grew deeper—images of stern

competition, of winning the race of life, of survival of the fittest, took on enhanced ideological meaning. Athletics were readily enlisted in the cause of new social alignments.

The problem of moral sports in a Christian land did not go away. Some commentators maintained a hard line against all forms of frivolous amusements. More commonly, ministers and urban reformers gave renewed support to wholesome recreations. Thus, Henry Bergh (1811–1888) called for healthful and invigorating sports to replace cock mains, dogfights, bear baits, and boxing matches. Bergh substituted for the singular “sport”—a rowdy, one who defied social custom—the plural “sports,” meaning rational and useful athletic activities. Dogfights and cock mains still found large and enthusiastic audiences, especially in the tradition-bound South and in polyglot cities like New York and New Orleans. The reformers never fully had their way with rural or working-class people. Nonetheless, new sports like baseball—not exactly a deacon’s first choice, but better than prizefighting—grew extremely popular in working-class communities, as men organized countless teams and leagues.

The most important institutional form of the new physicality was the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). Originally founded in England, the “Y” gave youths a refuge against the temptations of the metropolis. Here Christian fellowship, intellectual stimulation, and wholesome physical exercise supplanted the loneliness of boardinghouses and the evils of commercial amusements. Where urban life threatened good morals and communal order, YMCAs and similar organizations upheld these old ideals. The “Y” represented a rejuvenated, muscular, middle-class ethos. By 1869, San Francisco, Washington, and New York City all had “Y” gymnasias; within twenty-five years, there were 261 YMCA gyms scattered across America. Religious leaders like Washington Gladden and Henry Ward Beecher praised the “Y” for offering sports like baseball, football, swimming, calisthenics, bowling, and weight lifting in a wholesome and clean atmosphere. The underlying assumption of “Y” programs was that supervised athletics promoted religious and moral goals. Simply put, it made more sense to teach physical training under Christian auspices, imparting the values of fair play, cooperation, and good sportsmanship, than to have young men roam the streets. Gymnasias countered the licentiousness of pool halls; men who did calisthenics did not bet on horse races; clean sports engendered leadership, discipline, and toughness for capitalist society.

The “Y” movement was an early and prominent example of a widespread rehabilitation of sports that took place after the Civil War. Yet the proliferation

of such urban institutions was testimony to the resiliency of the working-class ways that the reformers wished to change. No doubt, some laboring men were persuaded that the Christian athlete was on the road to bourgeois respectability and social mobility. Others probably participated in “wholesome” athletics some of the time, but also patronized beer gardens, dance halls, gambling parlors, saloons, burlesque houses, and the disreputable sports that were part of that culture. The public-parks movement that swept the cities late in the nineteenth century provides a fine example of how men found their own paths. As antidotes to moral anarchy, vice, and corruption, city planners developed landscaped parks for public leisure. Clear brooks, lush trees, and blue skies were moral agents, they believed, which would improve the temperament of workers and elevate their thoughts. Parks could mollify class antagonism, planners argued, for here rich and poor came together in harmonious communion with nature. Unfortunately, rather than passively soaking up virtue, the urban multitudes came with beer, bats, and balls, ignored the “keep off the grass” signs, and had a rollicking good time.

But the efforts of neither the moral reformers nor their opponents ultimately were decisive in the rise of sports. More important was the commercialization of culture. Between the Civil War and the turn of the century, baseball became the acknowledged “national pastime,” boxing under new rules exploded in popularity, football grew into a college mania, and basketball took firm root in urban athletic clubs. In addition, tennis, golf, and bicycling swept over the upper middle class in waves of popularity, while laborers started their own semiprofessional and amateur leagues in various team sports. Organizational and business structures arose to regulate and rationalize new activities. If sports in that era were rudimentary compared to today, the games themselves and the structures that supported them were in place by the end of the nineteenth century.

Despite a vertiginous boom-and-bust cycle, this era left many workers with a little more disposable time and money than previously, especially those in the burgeoning white-collar sector. The old work ethic was in part a victim of its own success. As the economy slowly solved the age-old problem of insufficient productive capacity, and as work increasingly came to be thought of as a distinct realm of life, Americans were left with gaps of time to fill. Put another way, America’s exploding productive capacity was changing people’s perceptions of time. The dawning economy of potential abundance—where supply of aggregate goods and services might exceed demand—necessitated the stimulation of new wants and desires. The emergent ethos of play, of having fun, of “letting go” made a virtue of necessity.

New social conditions, then, transformed consciousness as well as material life. Production had shifted away from individuals' making goods for themselves and their communities, toward nameless workers' making goods for unseen others in return for cash. Now leisure more than ever revolved around the abstract concept of monetary exchange. Although Americans continued to create their own entertainment, the emergent national culture idealized the purchase of mass-produced commodities as a great human privilege and goal. Homegrown recreations competed for attention with mass entertainment, and the latter increasingly dominated and structured the former. To purchase leisure—to be a spectator at a ball game, or buy a bicycle or a baseball mitt—was to partake of a new cultural hallmark, the consumption of leisure. Entrepreneurs were quick to come in: A. J. Spalding began mass-producing sporting goods; newspaper tycoons like William Randolph Hearst for the first time printed entire sports sections; and authors like Gilbert Patten (creator of Frank Merriwell) coined money for themselves and their publishers by churning out formula fiction.

Sports were integrally tied to the transformation of life in a mature capitalist economy. Cities became the foci of new activities not just because overcrowding militated against old traditional amusements, but because the city was where the commodification of life was most pervasive; in cities, people were already learning the cycle of desire, pleasure, and more desire that came with the ethic of consumption. Moreover, new technologies opened up recreational possibilities: pneumatic tires facilitated the bicycle craze of the 1880s and 1890s, motion pictures allowed countless fans to see prizefights, electric lightbulbs illuminated grand new downtown arenas. And sports were becoming firmly entrenched in American business culture. By the 1870s, for example, baseball had already been hit with strikes, blacklists, and combinations to restrain trade. The team owners who founded the National League in 1876 soon wrested control of the game from the players, destroyed rival clubs, took over the apprenticeship system (the minor leagues), and instituted the reserve clause, which denied players the right to sell their labor to other franchises. Owners had, in short, attained what businessmen elsewhere strove for with varying degrees of success—controlled markets that minimized risk.

Both professional and amateur sports were part of the larger organizational revolution. League schedules were established, national rules promulgated, and regulatory bodies like the National Collegiate Athletic Association and Amateur Athletic Union formed. By the 1880s, professional baseball generated millions of dollars each year in revenue, and a prosperous franchise could draw 5,000 spectators per game. Moreover, sports became interlocked

with the larger world of business. A successful local team brought trade to hotels, restaurants, and bars; a new stadium meant jobs in construction, maintenance, and concessions. And sports replicated the structures of modernity. The keeping of statistics, the rational measurement of means and ends, bureaucratic organizations—all permeated American life, including sports. Sports also articulated the dominant ideologies of an advanced democratic capitalist society—meritocracy, scientific worldview, equal competition, victory through brains, pluck, and hard work. Sports were a metaphor for life: that is, for the life of males in a modern capitalist country.

Still, it would be a mistake to view sports as simply one more manifestation of a modernizing juggernaut. Older, more traditional sports such as boxing and cockfighting thrived in the late nineteenth century and appealed to ancient ideals of honor. Despite the structure of new professional and amateur sports, a subculture of raucous old pastimes continued to thrive. Modernization theory does capture the most striking trend in sports development—toward bureaucratic structures, rationalized play, quantifiable results. The problem is that these trends were often so mixed with seemingly antimodern ones. Richard Kyle Fox, for example, owner of the *National Police Gazette* during its heyday in the 1880s and 1890s, used the most modern business techniques to promote traditional sport; his publication, brilliantly rationalized in production and distribution, was filled with misogyny and racism, hardly the stuff of an egalitarian society.

Indeed, while reformers argued that sports taught the ideal of equal opportunity, the fact is that the playing fields of athletics, like those of life, were never level. Exclusive organizations like the New York Athletic Club—and every major city had exclusive athletic clubs by the end of the century—allowed only the most wealthy and powerful men to join. While workers might become interested in the outcome of a Harvard-Yale football game—indeed while those schools might even employ a "ringer" or two to assure victory—colleges remained elite institutions, effectively closed to the majority of Americans. To the extent that prestigious colleges did open up in this era, sports were part of the process by which the children of an industrial elite that was pushing its way into the most powerful positions in American life dispelled the boredom of the rigid old classical curriculum. Finally, the late nineteenth century saw the proliferation of exclusive country clubs and elite watering places like Newport, Rhode Island, and Saratoga, New York, that brought wealthy people together in play while excluding all lesser folk.

At high-amateur and professional levels, sports did admit whole new groups of people as spectators and participants. Yet a majority of Americans were largely left out. First, while there were some important gestures toward

women's sports during this era, domestic ideology, notions of female delicacy, and lingering Victorian prudishness kept most women from active interest in things athletic. Gender roles still defined men as active, women as passive, and the operative metaphors of sports all tended toward patriarchy. Tough competition, physical violence, the importance of winning, teamwork—sports as metaphor did not just reflect masculine ideals, they helped constitute and define those ideals. Competing, achieving, and winning were at the very core of late Victorian notions of manhood, so sports not only excluded women, they helped define and give shape to a masculine world that feared or devalued or mystified all that it regarded as feminine.

Ethnically, too, athletes in this era contained a strong streak of exclusivity. While sports had become an important symbol of American culture, most men of the immigrant generation probably were not terribly interested as spectators, and if they played sports at all, it was more likely to be games from their homelands. The children of immigrants, however, found in athletics a powerful sense of belonging to the only culture they knew firsthand. Symbolically, sports provided a sense of dual identity. Thus heavyweight boxing champion John L. Sullivan espoused both Irish nationalism and American patriotism, and he literally cloaked himself in both the Stars and Stripes and the emerald green when he entered the ring. For Irish-Americans who had long suffered severe discrimination, Sullivan represented not only glittering success, but also the possibility of identifying with both America and Ireland. In the twentieth century, baseball players like Joe DiMaggio and Hank Greenberg repeated this pattern for new immigrant groups.

The situation for blacks, however, was different. Despite the rhetoric of "may the best man win," by late in the nineteenth century, the openings that had existed in early professional sports closed down almost entirely. During the 1890s, African-Americans were systematically barred from major-league baseball, resulting in the formation of the all-black Negro leagues until Jackie Robinson reintegrated baseball after World War II. Moreover, boxing champion John L. Sullivan simply refused to fight black opponents, though the strongest contender during the late 1880s was an Australian black named Peter Jackson. Even in the now obscure but then quite popular sport of bicycle racing, African-American Marshall W. "Major" Taylor was the best cyclist in the world during the 1890s, yet he was excluded from major races. So in the late nineteenth century—an era of lynching and Jim Crow legislation, of the most virulent racism since Reconstruction—the sporting meritocracy proved meretricious at best. Access to organized sports was generally restricted by race and gender, and often by class.

Nevertheless, the sporting ideology that had become a commonplace of the late Victorian era was a powerful cement in American culture. Those excluded from the mainstream still created a sporting space with games and leagues of their own. Equally important, the ideas associated with sports—universal rules, fair play, utter seriousness in a frivolous cause, measurable performance, the joy of physical excellence, the tension of keen competition, the expertise of spectators—were constantly spreading into the larger national culture. Not for all Americans, but for increasing numbers of them, sometimes even crossing deep social chasms, sports were becoming a kind of national language or currency, a set of shared practices, values, and experiences so common as to become invisible as air.

In 1892, roughly a century after the illegal sport of boxing first appeared in America, William Lyon Phelps, professor of English at Yale, was reading the daily newspaper to his blind father, a Baptist minister. The old outlaw prize-fighting was in the news, and Phelps read the headline "Corbett Defeats Sullivan," then turned the page, assuming the elderly Victorian gentleman would not be interested. Phelps Senior leaned forward and said to his son, "Read it by rounds."