

Rough Riding

Today sports often resembles a substitute for war. In 1900, America's most prominent athletic spokesperson wanted war to begin to substitute for sports. The man was Teddy Roosevelt, and at age forty-two, before he was chosen to run as William McKinley's vice president, he was already a known figure. A member of one of the country's most prominent families, TR was known as a leading proponent of "Muscular Christianity." But more than anything else, he was catapulted to the vice presidency by his stature as a war celebrity, someone whom the media had already burnished in a golden hue after he organized the Rough Riders in the Spanish-American War. The myth of the Rough Riders, built around Teddy's fame, was that they were a gentlemen's corps of tremendous effectiveness. Reality was harsher: three-quarters of all Rough Riders either died, were wounded, or were struck by disease, and Teddy himself caught malaria.¹

In 1897, a year before the Rough Riders saw action, Roosevelt wrote, "In strict confidence . . . I should welcome almost any war, for I think this country needs one."² The itch to conquer was not his alone. This was the age of empire. As the *Washington Post* editorialized right before the Spanish-American War, "A new consciousness seems to have come

upon us—the consciousness of strength—and with it a new appetite, the yearning to show our strength. . . . Ambition, interest, land hunger, pride, the mere joy of fighting, whatever it may be, we are animated by a new sensation. We are face to face with a strange destiny. The taste of Empire is in the mouth of the people even as the taste of blood in the jungle.”³ And Indiana senator Albert Beveridge bellowed in 1897, “American factories are making more than the American people can use; American soil is producing more than they can consume. Fate has written our policy for us; the trade of the world must and shall be ours.”⁴

But it was Teddy Roosevelt, his love of war matched only by his love of sport, who best exemplified the new mood. And in the wake of the assassination of William McKinley, the forty-two-year-old Roosevelt became the youngest president in the country's history. As he told the Naval War College: “All the great masterful races have been fighting races. . . . No triumph of peace is quite so great as the supreme triumph of war.”⁵

The philosopher William James, who became one of the leading anti-imperialists of his time, wrote a scathing assessment of Roosevelt's character, describing him as a man who “gushes over war as the ideal condition of human society, for the manly strenuousness which it involves, and treats peace as a condition of blubberlike and swollen ignobility, fit only for huckstering weaklings, dwelling in the gray twilight and heedless of the higher life.”⁶

In the tragic absence of a permanent state of imperial war, Roosevelt became the great promoter of having the federal government fund sports programs as a cornerstone of the new American century. Just as King James feared that the absence of sports would leave his subjects unprepared for “warre,” Roosevelt saw masculinity and Muscular Christianity as symbiotic with a nation poised to conquer.

In 1903, he encouraged the launching of the Public Schools Athletic League—for boys only, of course—with the financial backing of some of America's most prominent bankers and industrialists. In seven years, seventeen cities adopted versions of the program. The mission statement of the PSAL was to “provide opportunities for educating students in physical fitness, character development and socialization skills

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through an athletic program that fosters teamwork, discipline and sportsmanship."⁷

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But Roosevelt—and the ethos of Muscular Christianity—saw a higher function for sports than merely keeping the urban poor in fighting shape. Just as their fathers had used sports to keep them from becoming "spindle-shanked," Roosevelt's generation imparted that same idea to their own children of privilege. Teddy's particular love was football. As he wrote in "The American Boy," "In life, as in a foot-ball game, the principle to follow is: Hit the line hard; don't foul and don't shirk, but hit the line hard."⁸

Before this period, football at the elite colleges bore no resemblance to the game today. The sport dates back to 1869, when Princeton and Rutgers played the inaugural intercollegiate game. Harvard and Yale started their black-and-blue-blooded rivalry in 1875, and the following year, four Ivy League schools formed the Intercollegiate Football Association to standardize rules. But the word *rules* overstates the degree of order on the field. The games had more in common with the bull- and rat-baiting days of yore than anything one would expect to come out of the Ivy League. Games tended to have all the poetry and artistry of a drunken brawl. The results were deadly. As sportswriter Dan Daly put it, "Modern football, we tend to forget, was born in a funeral parlor." In 1905, eighteen players died resulting from injuries on the field. It was so bad that in 1906, Roosevelt himself threatened to have the sport banned.⁹ Despite efforts to clean up the sport, which included the formation of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), thirty-three college players died in 1910.¹⁰

The man who started to turn football away from something resembling outtakes from *Braveheart* was a part-time coach and professor at Yale named Walter Camp. His ideas took several decades to emerge from the New Haven campus, but by 1892, at the age of thirty-three, Camp was already being called the "father of American football." He introduced everything from the forward pass and the line of scrimmage to the idea of teams fielding eleven men per side. Many today see in foot-

ball a kind of war game with pads. But Camp's model for how to order the game was based not on the military model but on the factory model. It was the imposed discipline of early industrial life that shaped football. As president and chairman of the New Haven Clock Company, Camp had firsthand knowledge of the factory system. Football should be a place, he believed, to teach order and obedience.¹¹

As Michael Oriard wrote in *Reading Football*, there was a direct correlation between Frederick Taylor's "four elements of scientific management (Science, Harmony, Cooperation, and Maximum Output) otherwise known as Taylorism, and Camp's principles of 'team work, strategy, and tactics.' Such parallels are more than coincidence. Walter Camp's professional life was lived in a modern manufacturing enterprise."¹²

Camp wrote, "Finding a weak spot through which a play can be made, feeling out the line with experimental attempts, concealing the real strength [until] everything is ripe for the big push, then letting drive where least expected, what is this, an outline of football or business tactics?" This made a winner out of Yale in the early years of football.¹³

Camp preached the gospel of football around the country in countless sermons, articles, and coaching retreats. He wasn't only selling a sport, but a way of life. "Camp was instrumental through writing and lecturing in attaching an almost mythical atmosphere of manliness and heroism to the game not previously known in American team sports," wrote Richard P. Borkowski.¹⁴

Camp delivered the sport from the violent pathology of elite northeastern colleges, making it something that had a national following. The first Thanksgiving game between Harvard and Yale, played in New York City, drew only 5,000 fans. But by 1884 that figure was 10,000, and by the late 1880s the Thanksgiving games were buzzworthy events. In the early 1890s crowds of 30,000–40,000 people were the norm.¹⁵

The sport was machismo for the middle classes. Future Olympic chieftain Avery Brundage wrote as a young man, "No better place than a football field could be chosen to test out a man. Here a fellow is stripped of most of the finer little things contributed by ages of civilization, and

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Yale's yearly football receipts grew to \$100,000 by the end of the nineteenth century, more than its law school or medical school budget and one-eighth of the entire school budget. King Football had taken the throne.¹⁷

Football and the Shaping of Paul Robeson

This early era of football forged one of the enduring freedom fighters of the twentieth century, Paul Robeson. Robeson is best known as an actor, singer, and political activist, but he was also one of the finest football players ever to come out of the state of New Jersey. Robeson achieved this stature at Rutgers University. He was only the third African American student in the history of the school and during his years of study was the only black student on campus.¹⁸

The segregation of the day was so intense that Paul Robeson, football hero and one of the great defining voices of the century, couldn't join the Rutgers glee club. His coach, George Foster Sanford, was thrilled at the prospect of having a player with Robeson's skill, but half his thirty-man team had pledged not to play if a "Negro" joined the team.

"On my first day of scrimmage," Robeson remembered years later, "they set about making sure I would not get on their team. One boy slugged me in the face and smashed my nose—an injury that has been a trouble to me as a singer ever since. And then as I was down, flat on my back, another boy got me with his knee. He just came over and dropped his knee into my upper body, dislocating my right shoulder. At the age of seventeen, that was tough going—a broken nose, a dislocated shoulder, a split lip, two swollen eyes and plenty of other cuts and bruises."¹⁹ Robeson was laid up for a week and a half but returned to the field determined to hit back:

I made a tackle and was on the ground, my right hand extended beyond the pile-up and palm down. . . . A boy came over and stepped down hard on my hand. He meant to break the bones. The

bones held, but the cleats of his shoes took every single one of the finger-nails off of my right hand. The next play again came right at my defensive end position; the whole backfield came at me. In rage, I swept out my arms . . . [and the] interference just seemed to fall down. Then there was only the ball carrier; I wanted to kill him. . . . I actually had him up above my head. . . . I was going to smash him so hard to the ground that . . . he'd break right in two.²⁰

It was then that Coach Sanford put Robeson on the varsity. It was also then that Robeson's teammates stopped trying to "kill him." His teammates moved further toward begrudging acceptance when the team was shut out at the hands of rival Princeton in a game where Robeson rode the bench.

When Rutgers played West Virginia later that year, Robeson dominated on both sides of the ball. West Virginia's coach yelled at his players, "Any player who can take the beating that Robeson has taken from you, giving as good as he's gotten and without squealing, is not Black. *He's a white man!* Now go back out there and play like hell—and give him a break!"²¹

Robeson understood the challenges and welcomed them. "When I was out on a football field or in a classroom or anywhere else, I wasn't just there on my own. I was the representative of a lot of Negro boys who wanted to play football, who wanted to go to college; and as their representative, I had to show that I could take whatever they handed out. . . . This was part of our struggle."²²

James D. Carr, Rutgers' first African American student, a Phi Beta Kappa who graduated in 1892, wrote to school president William H.S. Demarest. Carr warned with prescience about Robeson's possible future move toward revolutionary politics:

I am deeply moved at the injustice done to a student of Rutgers in good and regular standing of good moral character and splendid mental equipment—one of the best athletes ever developed at Rutgers—who, because guilty of a skin not colored as their own, was excluded from the honorable field of athletic encounter, as

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one inferior. . . . Not only he, but his race as well was deprived of the opportunity of showing its athletic ability, and, perhaps, its athletic superiority. . . . Can you imagine his thoughts and feelings when, in contemplative mood, he reflects in the years to come that his Alma Mater faltered and quailed when the test came, and that she preferred the holding of an athletic game to the maintenance of her honor and principle?²³

Once Robeson achieved both in the classroom and on the football field, the university was all too quick to pat itself on the back for its remarkable openmindedness in "embracing" him. The school newspaper, the *Targum*, ran an editorial following Robeson's graduation that read:

Individuals occasionally complain that there is no equality for members of the colored race in the United States. It is true that what is generally known as social equality has not been granted by the majority of whites. . . . But one fact which deserves consideration, and is too frequently neglected, is that equality does exist . . . for those colored men and women who struggle for success. Look at Paul Robeson, former All-American football player and one of four men tapped for the senior honor society when he was an undergraduate at Rutgers. What other nation has a record of encouraging Negro achievement even remotely comparable to the record of the United States? This is something to be emphasized through the length and breadth of the land. For when dictators of red radicalism and Black reaction really concentrate on splitting America internally, they will no doubt start by making fancy promises to the colored people—telling them that they have been oppressed.²⁴

The irony is that Robeson came to look to "red radicalism" as a way to fight racism.

World War I

Sports tend to make their most jarring transformations in periods of war. During the American Revolution, sports receded to the background of

daily life but were critical among Washington's troops in fighting the boredom of base camp. After the Civil War, sports that were previously regional spread across the nation. World War I accelerated sports through a similar period of transition.

The war itself was deeply unpopular. Six weeks after the declaration of war, the government expected 1 million men to sign up and fight—but only 73,000 had enlisted. Congress then instituted conscription to make up the difference.²⁵

The right to free speech was also sharply abridged. Eugene Debs, the labor leader and socialist who had run for president four times, was given a ten-year sentence for his 1918 speech in Canton, Ohio, where he said, "They tell us that we live in a great free republic; that our institutions are democratic; that we are a free and self-governing people. That is too much, even for a joke. . . . Wars throughout history have been waged for conquest and plunder. . . . And that is war in a nutshell. The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles."²⁶

In his closing remarks to the jury at his trial, Debs said, "Your honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." In 1920, running for president on the Socialist Party platform from prison, Debs received 13 percent of the popular vote.²⁷

As President Woodrow Wilson continued his unpopular prosecution of his "war to end all wars," he saw sports as a critical way to prepare future troops. There were voices that thought sports should be suspended for the duration of the war, but Wilson strongly believed otherwise. "I hope that the normal course of college sports will be continued," he said, ". . . as a real contribution to the national defense." This is exactly what happened.²⁸

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Athletics now would be sanctioned and even financed by the federal government. Recreational experts assured the nation that by playing baseball and football, by boxing and exercising, young American men would be fit enough for war. . . . But not until World War I were athletic training and competition systematically adopted for troop morale, hygiene, and physical readiness for war. Recreation professionals greeted these developments enthusiastically. . . . The celebration went even further, as the AEF [American Expeditionary Forces] championships slid over into the Inter-Allied Games (also known as the Military Olympics) in Joinville, France, in the summer of 1919, an astonishing extravaganza staged in the midst of postwar devastation which nevertheless drew something like half a million spectators over two weeks.²⁹

Walter Camp, by now nearly sixty, became athletic director of the navy.

Jack Johnson

For African Americans, this was a time of terror. Hollywood gave them D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, a Ku Klux Klan propaganda film (based on a play called *The Klansman*) that President Wilson enthusiastically screened in the White House in 1915, calling it "history writ by lightning." The Klan achieved a remarkable resurgence, using *Birth of a Nation* to recruit. Not surprisingly, this was a period that saw lynchings reach epidemic proportions. In 1919 alone, one estimate is that there were eighty-three lynchings in the United States.³⁰

The place for African Americans was precarious; for African American athletes, it was no less so. The color line in baseball was entrenched. African American jockeys had been rooted out of their sport. In football, Yale's great African American player Fritz Pollard was told after one game, "You're a nigger, but you're the best goddamned football player I ever saw." That was a high point.³¹

For African American women, Olympic official Norman Cox lobbied

that "the Committee should create a special category of competition for them—the unfairly advantaged 'hermaphrodites' who regularly defeated 'normal women,' those less skilled 'child-bearing types' with "largish breasts, wide hips [and] knocked knees."³²

This was the era of deeply racist pseudoscience. The attitude was not only that blacks were mentally inferior to whites, but also that they were physically inferior to whites. Blacks were cast as too lazy and too undisciplined ever to be taken seriously as athletes. In the midst of these ideological rapids stood Jack Johnson.

When Johnson became the first heavyweight boxing champion with black skin in 1908, his victory created a serious crisis in the conventional wisdom about race. The media whipped up a frenzy around the need for "a great white hope" (a phrase coined by author Jack London) to restore order to the boxing world—and the world in general. Former champion Jim Jeffries was coaxed out of retirement and said, "I am going into this fight for the sole purpose of proving that a white man is better than a Negro."³³

In the weeks before their fight, Johnson—in marked contrast to the standard African American posture of the day—was more than willing to be heard. In a July 4, 1910, *Philadelphia Inquirer* story titled "Jack Johnson Believes He's Jeff's Master," he is quoted as saying, "I honestly believe that in pugilism I am Jeffries' master, and it is my purpose to demonstrate this in the most decisive way possible. . . . Let me say in conclusion that I believe the meeting between Mr. Jeffries and myself will be a great test of strength, skill, and endurance. The tap of the gong will be music to me."³⁴

This might seem today like something Dame Judi Dench would say to Helen Mirren before the Oscars, but at the time it was verbal fireworks. Another piece that day in the *Dallas Morning News*, titled "Negroes Praying for Johnson," says, "Some others fear trouble if he [Johnson] wins and are consequently boosting Jeffries. . . . For the first time Independence Day will be enjoyed as a real holiday by the negroes tomorrow."³⁵

In the black press, the backing of Johnson was without equivocation. On February 4, 1910, a cartoon on the front page of the African Ameri-

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can newspaper the *Chicago Defender* showed Johnson and Jeffries in the ring, with Johnson surrounded by ominous spirits bearing names such as "Race Hatred," "Prejudice," and "Negro Persecution." The caption read, "He Will Have Them All to Beat."³⁶

In the lead-up to the fight, the *Defender* commented, "On the arid plains of the Sage Brush State the white man and the negro will settle the mooted question of supremacy. . . . When the smoke of the battle clears away, and when the din of mingled cheers and groans have died away . . . there will be deep mourning throughout the domains of Uncle Sam over Jeffries inability."³⁷

At the fight itself, the ringside band played "All Coons Look Alike to Me," and the all-white crowd chanted, "Kill the nigger." In an early incarnation of the information superhighway, young children working as "telegram runners" ran through urban environs every round calling out the rounds.³⁸ But Johnson was faster, stronger, and smarter than Jeffries. He knocked Jeffries out with ease.

"More than 25,000 people had gathered to watch the fight," Johnson wrote in his autobiography, "and as I looked about me, and scanned that sea of white faces I felt the auspiciousness of the occasion. There were few men of my own race among the spectators. I realized that my victory in this event meant more than on any previous occasion. It wasn't just the championship that was at stake—it was my own honor, and in a degree the honor of my own race. . . . The 'white hope' had failed."³⁹

It is no exaggeration to say that the failure of the "white hope" caused a full-blown ideological crisis. "That Mr. Johnson should so lightly and carelessly punch the head of Mr. Jeffries," wrote the *New York World*, "must come as a shock to every devoted believer in the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon race."⁴⁰

After Johnson's victory, there were race riots around the country—in Illinois, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Texas, and Washington, D.C. Most of the riots consisted of white lynch mobs attacking blacks, and blacks fighting back. One hundred fifty-one people died. This reaction to a boxing match was the most widespread racial uprising that the United States had ever seen—or ever would see until the assassination of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Right-wing and religious organizations immediately moved to ban boxing. Congress actually passed a law banning boxing films.⁴¹

Even some black leaders, such as Booker T. Washington, pushed Johnson to condemn African Americans for rioting, and to toe the line. But Johnson remained defiant. For this mortal sin—and a variety of venal ones—he faced harassment and persecution for most of his life. He was forced into exile in 1913 on the trumped-up charge of transporting a white woman across state lines for prostitution. As Johnson wrote in his autobiography, as soon as he defeated Jeffries, “from that minute on, the hunt for the ‘white hope’ was redoubled, and when it proceeded with so little success other methods were taken to dispose of me.”⁴²

Washington, who believed that blacks should abstain from any kind of agitation and focus on low-level economic development, couldn't stand Johnson. As he said with unvarnished scorn:

I can only say at this time, that this is another illustration of the almost irreparable injury that a wrong action on the part of a single individual may do to a whole race. It shows the folly of those persons who think that they alone will be held responsible for the evil that they do. Especially is this true in the case of the Negro in the United States today. No one can do so much injury to the Negro race as the Negro himself. This will seem to many persons unjust, but no one can doubt that it is true. What makes the situation seem a little worse in this case, is the fact that it was the white man, not the black man who has given Jack Johnson the kind of prominence he has enjoyed up to now and put him, in other words, in a position where he has been able to bring humiliation upon the whole race of which he is a member.⁴³

Washington's contempt for Johnson didn't stop him from setting aside a special assembly room at his Tuskegee Institute to hear special telegraphic reports of Johnson's fights.⁴⁴

But Johnson to the mass of his people was no devil. He was becoming folklore. In the words of a ditty sung to the tune of a spiritual:

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Jack Johnson knocked Jim Jeffries down.

Jim Jeffries jumped up an' hit Jack on the chin,

An' then Jack knocked him down agin.

The Yankees hold the play;

The white man pulls the trigger;

But it make no difference what the white man say,

The world champion's still a nigger.⁴⁵

Another who differed from the Booker T. Washington view of Johnson was Washington's great rival W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois, a towering intellectual, was one of the first to try to put the moralizing about "violence" in sports—and the street violence associated with Jack Johnson—in some sort of context. As he wrote in the *Crisis*, the organ of the NAACP, in 1914:

There is today some brutality connected with boxing, but as compared with football and boat racing it may be seriously questioned whether boxing deserves to be put in a separate class by reason of its cruelty. Certainly it is a highly civilized pastime as compared with the international game of war which produces so many 'heroes' and 'national monuments'. Boxing has fallen into disfavor—into very great disfavor. . . . The cause is clear: Jack Johnson . . . has out-sparred an Irishman. He did it with little brutality, the utmost fairness and great good nature. He did not 'knock' his opponent senseless. Apparently he did not even try. Neither he nor his race invented prize fighting or particularly like it. Why then this thrill of national disgust? Because Johnson is black. Of course some pretend to object to Mr. Johnson's character. But we have yet to hear, in the case of White America, that marital troubles have disqualified prize fighters or ball players or even statesmen. It comes down, then, after all to this unforgivable blackness.⁴⁶

Du Bois also differed from Washington on the essence of sports itself, wanting African Americans to engage more fully in the nation's expanding sporting life. He wrote, "I have long noted with silent appre-

hension a distinct tendency among us, to depreciate and belittle and sneer at means of recreation, to consider amusement as the peculiar property of the devil, and to look upon even its legitimate pursuit as time wasted and energy misspent."⁴⁷

Black Sox

It was in 1912 that Jack Johnson was charged with taking his lover (and later wife) Lucille Cameron across state lines for "immoral purposes," a violation of the Mann Act. The presiding judge was a man named Kenesaw Mountain Landis. Landis was not done passing judgment on the world of sports. In 1919, eight members of the Chicago White Sox—known for eternity as the Black Sox—were accused of conspiring to throw the World Series. Although they were cleared in a court of law, they were damned with a lifetime ban put down by a new creation: the baseball commissioner. This first commissioner was Kenesaw Mountain Landis. In the wake of the World Series, the owners wanted someone to exercise total control over the game and rescue its integrity in the eyes of the public. Judge Landis certainly had earned his bones in the eyes of the ownership class. In 1918, he sat in judgment of Big Bill Haywood and about one hundred other members of the revolutionary union the Industrial Workers of the World, or "Wobblies," for violating the Espionage Act of 1917. While Landis oversaw their harsh sentences and even deportations, most of his decisions were either reversed on appeal or nullified by presidential pardon.⁴⁸

As *Washington Post* columnist Shirley Povich described the reclusive and all-powerful commissioner, "There is a man of mystery. Mysterious in the manner that he so completely dominates his associates, who, in his present undertaking, are his employers. He not only tells them what to do, but how to do it and when. And he makes them like it."⁴⁹

Landis's influence grew even more powerful toward the end of his reign in 1944. As we will see, he was a major obstacle to ending baseball's color line. But in 1920, it was the Black Sox who felt his wrath. The great Shoeless Joe Jackson, a lifetime .356 hitter who batted .375 and committed no errors in the World Series he was supposed to have thrown, never played again.

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The year 1919 also saw two massive reforms that put a terrific stamp on the years to come: women's suffrage and prohibition. The 1920s would be defined in many ways by the desire of women to be heard and the desire of a nation recovering from war and upheaval to have a drink.

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