

Sports and Leisure

The 1920s were known as the Jazz Age, a time of hard partying and weary disaffection. The decade began, however, not with groan of cynicism but with an international challenge to power. In the wake of World War I, millions of people in every corner on earth demanded change. The *Nation* magazine wrote:

The most extraordinary phenomenon of the present time . . . is the unprecedented revolt of the rank and file. . . .

In Russia it has dethroned the Czar. . . . In Korea and India and Egypt and Ireland it keeps up an unyielding resistance to political tyranny. In England it brought about the railway strike, against the judgement of the men's own executives. In Seattle and San Francisco it has resulted in the stevedores' recent refusal to handle arms or supplies destined for the overthrow of the Soviet Government. In one district of Illinois it manifested itself in a resolution of striking miners, unanimously requesting their state executive "to go to Hell." In Pittsburgh, according to Mr. [Samuel] Gompers, it compelled the reluctant American Federation officers to call the steel strike, lest the control pass into the hands of the I.W.W.'s and

other "radicals." In New York, it brought about the longshoremen's strike and kept the men out in defiance of union officials, and caused the upheaval in the printing trade, which the international officers, even though the employers worked hand in glove with them, were completely unable to control.

The common man . . . losing faith in the old leadership, has experienced a new access of self-confidence, or at least a new recklessness, a readiness to take chances on his own account . . . authority cannot any longer be imposed from above; it comes automatically from below.¹

But this period of revolt met with a terrible backlash as the federal government used its wartime powers to crush dissent. The backlash was spearheaded by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who led what were known as the Palmer Raids. That summer, eight bombs went off around the country, including one in front of Palmer's home. Thousands were rounded up and hundreds were deported, including anarchist and women's rights activist Emma Goldman. Much of this was done under the guise of "anticommunism." In one day in 1920, five thousand to ten thousand members of the U.S. Communist Party were jailed in thirty cities.²

In his essay "The Case Against the Reds," Palmer charged that "tongues of revolutionary heat were licking the alt[ar]s of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, seeking to replace marriage vows with libertine laws, burning up the foundations of society."³

The combination of an economic boom and a nation fatigued by conflict and war created conditions that made the Palmer Raids possible: hundreds of thousands of urban dwellers identified as part of a "lost generation" that rejected traditional society. This lost generation ostensibly rejected politics, but their libertarian, antipolitical ethos created social space both for women and gays and lesbians that would not be seen again until the 1960s.

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*Masculine women, feminine men
Which is the rooster, which is the hen?
It's hard to tell 'em apart today! And say!
Sister is busy learning to shave,
Brother just loves his permanent wave,
It's hard to tell 'em apart today! Hey, hey!
Girls were girls and boys were boys when I was a tot,
Now we don't know who is who, or even what's what!
Knickers and trousers, baggy and wide,
Nobody knows who's walking inside,
Those masculine women and feminine men!⁴*

There was a new woman on the urban scene, known as the "flapper." Precocious and identifiable through a shorter bob haircut, the flapper set traditional gender roles on their ear. In a 1925 article in the *New Republic* called "Flapper Jane," journalist Bruce Bliven expresses the confusion people felt about the age and this new kind of young woman.

Jane is 19. . . . This Jane, being 19, is a flapper, though she urgently denies that she is a member of the younger generation. The younger generation, she will tell you, is aged 15 to 17; and she professes to be decidedly shocked at the things they do and say. That is a fact which would interest her minister, if he knew it—poor man, he knows so little! For he regards Jane as a perfectly horrible example of wild youth—paint, cigarettes, cocktails, petting parties—oooh! Yet if the younger generation shocks her as she says, query: how wild is Jane?

. . . Generally speaking, however, it is safe to say that as regards the wildness of youth there is a good deal more smoke than fire. Anyhow, the new Era of Undressing, as already suggested, has spread far beyond the boundaries of Jane's group. The fashion is followed by hordes of unquestionably monogamous matrons, including many who join heartily in the general ululations as to what young people are coming to. Attempts to link the new freedom

with prohibition, with the automobile, the decline of Fundamentalism, are certainly without foundation. These may be accessory, and indeed almost certainly are, but only after the fact.

That fact is, as Jane says, that women to-day are shaking off the shreds and patches of their age-old servitude. "Feminism" has won a victory so nearly complete that we have even forgotten the fierce challenge which once inhered in the very word. Women have highly resolved that they are just as good as men, and intend to be treated so. They don't mean to have any more unwanted children. They don't intend to be debarred from any profession or occupation which they choose to enter. They clearly mean (even though not all of them yet realize it) that in the great game of sexual selection they shall no longer be forced to play the role, simulated or real, of helpless quarry. If they want to wear their heads shaven, as a symbol of defiance against the former fate which for three millennia forced them to dress their heavy locks according to male decrees, they will have their way. If they should elect to go naked nothing is more certain than that naked they will go, while from the sidelines to which he has been relegated mere man is vouchsafed permission only to pipe a feeble Hurrah!⁵

Many of the culturati, still reeling from World War I, proudly adopted the label "anti-American." At their pinnacle was Baltimore's H.L. Mencken, who wrote in his classic essay "On Being an American,"

Here the business of getting a living . . . is enormously easier than it is in any other Christian land—so easy, in fact, that an educated and forehanded man who fails at it must actually make deliberate efforts to that end. Here the general average of intelligence, of knowledge, of competence, of integrity, of self-respect, of honor is so low that any man who knows his trade, does not fear ghosts, has read fifty good books, and practices the common decencies stands out as brilliantly as a wart on a bald head, and is thrown willy-nilly into a meager and exclusive aristocracy. And here, more than anywhere else I know of or have heard of, the daily panorama of

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foonerics, of aesthetic ribaldries, of legal swindles and harlotries,
of miscellaneous rogueries, villainies, imbecilities, grotesqueries,
and extravagances—is so inordinately gross and preposterous, so
perfectly brought up to the highest conceivable amperage, so
steadily enriched with an almost fabulous daring and originality,
that only the man who was born with a petrified diaphragm can fail
to laugh himself to sleep every night, and to awake every morning
with all the eager, unflagging expectation of a Sunday-school su-
perintendent touring the Paris peep-shows.⁶

Mencken's style influenced many writers, including African Amer-
ican radical author Richard Wright. In his autobiographical *Black Boy*,
Wright writes of Mencken,

I was jarred and shocked by the clear, clean, sweeping sentences.
. . . Why did he write like that? I pictured the man as a raging
demon, slashing with his pen . . . denouncing everything Ameri-
can . . . laughing . . . mocking God, authority. . . This man was
fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon,
using them as one would use a club. . . I read on and what
amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had
the courage to say it.⁷

The new mass media and celebrity culture created icons out of
people who in decades previous would have been pariahs: Mencken,
F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the flapper were discussed in broadsheets and
tabloids. The Jazz Age was a time of flux.

The Sport of Celebrity

The celebrity culture found a much more comfortable home in the
world of sports. Mencken hailed from the city of Baltimore. The 1920s
also saw the rise of another child of Charm City: George Herman "Babe"

Ruth. Ruth is credited with saving baseball after the 1919 Black Sox scandal, especially after a monster 1920 season when he hit fifty-four home runs, a total that exceeded the number of homers for every other team on the big leagues except for the Philadelphia Phillies. His slugging percentage of .847 that year stood as an untouchable record until Barry Bonds surpassed it in 2001.⁸

Ruth's towering home runs were not the only feat turning him into an icon. The new mass media, exemplified by radio and the newsreel, were creating a new kind of sports celebrity. It wasn't just Ruth's home runs. It was his beatific face. It was his nicknames: "The Great Bambino," "The Big Bam," "The Sultan of Swat." It was his famed gluttony, celebrated in a period of excess. The age has in many ways been exemplified by what Babe Ruth is reputed to have said when he was asked if it was appropriate he should be making more than the president: "Why not? I'm having a better year than he is!"⁹

During this golden age of sports, Ruth was one of several of the new sporting heroes. Others such as boxers Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney, football star Red Grange, and golfer Bobby Jones were also made mythic.

Their celebrity was ornately constructed by a new breed of sports columnist. Replacing the tabloid gutter dwellers of the shiny sheets were sportswriters who were lyrical and even literary. The Mount Rushmore of these poetical pundits of the 1920s was occupied by Heywood Broun, Damon Runyon, Paul Gallico, and Grantland Rice. They were lyrical and literary. They were also about as subtle as a blowtorch.

Rice is best known perhaps for nicknaming Notre Dame's football backfield the "Four Horsemen" (as in the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse) for the *New York Herald Tribune*.

Outlined against a blue-gray October sky the Four Horsemen rode again. In dramatic lore they are known as Famine, Pestilence, Destruction and Death. These are only aliases. Their real names are Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley and Layden. They formed the crest of the South Bend cyclone before which another fighting Army team was swept over the precipice at the Polo Grounds this after-

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noon as 55,000 spectators peered down upon the bewildering
 panorama spread out upon the green plain below.¹⁰

Washington Post columnist Shirley Povich wrote of Rice, "He was the
 first to prove, I think, that sportswriters could actually write, at least one
 of them."¹¹

Rice's style of sportswriting did more than just provide some of the
 most memorable newspaper prose of the century. It served to create out-
 sized heroes out of ordinary jocks. It transported athletes from the realm
 of the tangible to the legendary. These writers were the Greek chorus for
 the people who would become the gods of the twenty-first century. They
 collectively helped cement the separation between the professional and
 the spectator. Rice didn't just write that Hall of Fame pitcher Dizzy
 Dean had a great fastball. He wrote:

*Yes, it's Dean, Dean, Dean,
 He's a beggar with a bullet through your spleen,
 Though at times some bat has flayed you,
 by the Texas sun that made you,
 you're a better man than bats are, Dizzy Dean.*¹²

In the world of Rice and company, a prerequisite to achieving this
 kind of status was being white and having an xy chromosome pair.

Hard Road, No Glory

The dark period for African Americans that surrounded the ascendancy
 of Jack Johnson continued into the 1920s. The Ku Klux Klan grew to
 four and a half million members and even spread out of the South and
 took root in the North and Midwest. The acceptance of both racial vio-
 lence and the ideas of white supremacy led to the growth of Marcus
 Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African
 Communities League (UNIA-ACL) and calls to go "back to Africa." At
 its peak, the UNIA boasted as many as four million members. The ma-
 jority of blacks had no interest in going back at all. What they wanted
 was a sense of pride and community in a dehumanizing world. The fa-

thers of both Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali were influenced by Garvey's teachings.¹³

In the world of sports, the opportunities were at best shallow. For African American men who had dreams of playing basketball, the journey began and ended with Abe Saperstein's Harlem Globetrotters. Early Globetrotters play was the basketball equivalent of the minstrel shows so popular in vaudeville and on the big screen. But it was also the only way African Americans could make a living playing basketball until after World War II. As Nelson George wrote, "It's no accident that the Trotters' antics found favor with white fans at a time America's favorite Black movie star was Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry, also known as Stepin Fetchit."¹⁴

But the 1920s were not just a time of minstrel basketball and Klan growth. It was the period of the Harlem Renaissance, when African Americans seized popular art in all its forms—poetry, literature, dance, music—and irrevocably altered its course. Through the Negro Leagues, they also changed how baseball was perceived and played.

No One's Sad Sister

The Negro Leagues in the 1920s are often discussed as the sad sister of segregation. Certainly players with tremendous talent were paid less and received a fraction of the fanfare of their white counterparts. "It was rough barnstorming," recalled the legendary player Cool Papa Bell.

We traveled by bus, you see. You'd be surprised at the conditions we played under. We would frequently play two and three games a day. We'd play a twilight game, ride 40 miles, and play another game under the lights. . . . Every night they'd have to find us places to stay if we weren't in a big city up North. We went into a lot of small towns where they'd never seen a colored person in some of those places we couldn't find anyplace to sleep so we slept on the bus. If we had to, we could convert the seats into beds. We'd just pull over to the side of the road, in a cornfield or someplace and sleep until the break of day, and then we'd go on into the

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next town, hoping we'd find a restaurant that would be willing to
 serve colored people. All those things we experienced, today peo-
 ple wouldn't believe it.¹⁵

But hardship was only part of the story. There is another reading of
 the Negro Leagues at this time: an independent locus of power and a
 source of pride and support, much like the historically black colleges.
 The Negro Leagues were welcomed by African Americans, especially
 given their treatment as spectators in other sports venues. Major league
 stadiums that seated blacks were routinely segregated, with African
 Americans in the outfield seats. African American photographer Ernest
 Withers remembered sitting up there "and hearing the white folks
 chant, 'Hit it in the coal pile!' That's where all the 'niggers' were."¹⁶ At
 Negro League games blacks often shared bleachers with white folks,
 though there was still a dividing line. As Cool Papa Bell later recalled,
 "In the Negro Leagues the audience was mixed but mostly colored.
 Even down South there were some white people at the games. When we
 played the Birmingham Black Barons in their park, there were always
 lots of whites in the crowd, but they were separated by a rope. You could
 be sitting right next to a white man, but that rope was always there."¹⁷

But the white press never reported on the Negro Leagues. The black
 press also didn't cover it. As Withers remembered, "They didn't get no
 Sunday-to-Sunday pictures of ball games. That wasn't part of their jour-
 nalists workings." Casey Jones, the catcher for the Memphis Red Sox,
 said, "Nobody really knew about us. Oh the black people around the
 country and in the South knew about us but nobody else."¹⁸ The Com-
 munist Party's newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, printed the scores when it
 started its sports section, but that wasn't until the 1930s. The success
 of the early Negro Leagues, in particular the Negro National League,
 was due to the influence of Rube Foster, known as the "father of black
 baseball."

Foster was a fine baseball player himself. He was also intelligent,
 prideful, and deeply competitive. Other men in the Negro Leagues fit
 this description as well. In 1903, when Foster played for the Philadel-

phia Giants, his first baseman, who could punch better than he could field, was Jack Johnson. But Foster's great accomplishments would come not on the field but in the owner's box.¹⁹

Under Foster's stewardship, the Negro Leagues became perhaps the largest and certainly the most geographically diverse black-owned business in the United States. That meant—and this is rarely explored in discussions of the Negro Leagues—it was an employer of not only marginalized black ballplayers but also African American accountants, bookkeepers, trainers, and all sorts of skilled and unskilled labor that otherwise would have struggled to find work.²⁰

Foster had a vision of his Negro National League as an entity that could sit across the table from major league baseball and negotiate desegregation on equal terms. As Foster himself wrote with great optimism of the Negro National Leagues in 1906:

Organization is its only hope. With the proper organization, patterned after the men who have made baseball a success, we will, in three years, be rated as other leagues are rated. We have the players and it could not be a failure, as the same territory is traveled now by all clubs, with no organization or money. It would give us a rating and standing in the daily papers which would create an interest and we could then let the best clubs in our organization play for the world's championship with other clubs, champions of their leagues.²¹

Certainly the major leagues gave Foster quiet respect. Managers would arrive unannounced at games Foster managed to take free lessons, and it was from Foster that the major leagues learned the bunt-and-run.²²

Foster saw his approach as leading to a day when the color line would be eliminated through the wholesale integration of entire National Negro League teams into the major leagues. But it was a dream destroyed. Though he had a successful run, the pressure of this work ate away at Foster. He was an obsessive who believed—with some justifica-

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tion—that the league would fall apart without his constant stewardship. Once he hit a player across the head with his pipe for tripling after he was given the bunt sign. Deviations from order would mean chaos. Foster's family eventually had to commit him to a mental hospital. He was institutionalized until his death on December 9, 1930, at the age of fifty-one. The National Negro Leagues collapsed the year after he died. In 1981, he was finally inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.²³

Women in the 1920s

The age of the whalebone corset was starting to give way. Women in sports were making a transition from passive and scorned to an active and accepted part of the public sporting life.

In 1922, a nineteen-year-old swimmer, Sybil Bauer, smacked down old perceptions when she broke the world (men's) record in the backstroke. In 1926 Gertrude Ederle, a ten-Olympic-medal-winner from New York, gained international renown by becoming only the sixth person to swim the English Channel—two hours faster than the five men who preceded her.²⁴ In a 1927 *Chicago Defender* reader poll to name the city's most popular black athlete, women were five of the seventeen vote getters.

Athletics at women's colleges were in full swing. The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), the chief organization of amateur athletics, which wore its social conservatism like a badge of honor, started to give way. In 1913 AAU president James Sullivan had declared that his all-important organization could never sanction women's athletics because he had "no desire to make girls public characters." As Susan Cahn writes, "Sullivan, like others, of his day, linked women's public athletic activity to the negative connotation of 'public women,' a term that referred to prostitutes or disreputable women of the streets." In 1924, however, the AAU finally relented and offered a women's national track-and-field championship.²⁵

For working-class women, factory teams in a variety of sports were sprouting around the country. Management saw this as a sound strategy for pulling women away from the radical movements that many were a part of in the previous decade. These leagues proved very popular, giving

many women their first opportunity to play sports. They also provided a respite from the factory floor and a dose of fresh air.

The most famous female athlete of the first half of the twentieth century came out of the factory. Mildred Ella "Babe" Didrikson rose to fame as a multisport star, representing the Dallas-based Employers' Casualty Company team as an eighteen-year-old. She went on to win three medals in track and field in the 1932 Olympics. As she said later, "I could have won a medal in five events if they let me."²⁶ She also became the standard for all women golfers. Yet despite her towering athletic accomplishments, Didrikson was denounced as "mannish," "not quite female," and a "Muscle Moll" who could not "compete with other girls in the very ancient and time honored sport of mantrapping."²⁷

Hearing that in addition to track and field she also played basketball, football, and numerous other sports, an astonished journalist asked Didrikson, "Is there anything at all you don't play?" She responded, "Yeah, dolls."²⁸

In 1927 American tennis great Helen Wills won the first of her eight women's singles championships at England's prestigious Wimbledon tennis tournament. She dominated the sport for the next six years. But unlike her male counterparts, this was seen somehow as a deficit. Newspapermen who had once praised Wills's cool demeanor now described her as a "heartless crusher of lesser talents" and a "killer type of fighter" whose "austere and inexorable" style had "all the warmth and animation of a deceased codfish."²⁹

Male sportswriters tended to vacillate, finding female athletic talent to be either threatening or titillating. Paul Gallico wrote, "There is no girl living who can manage to look anything but awful during the process of some strenuous game played on a hot day."³⁰

In contrast, Grantland Rice had a different view of the sporting woman in his poem "The Baseball Girl":

*The type of girl which keeps each head cavorting in a whirl,
Is the nectarine of nature which we dub "The Baseball Girl."
She's got "proper curves," you know, well rounded out and neat,
She has the "speed"—nor do we refer to her feet.*

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*She always "makes a hit" to boot, and, what is very nice,
She's ready at the proper time to "make a sacrifice."*³¹

Rice also wrote that the "alert and aggressive" American girl athlete
"is not only getting a finely molded body . . . she is also getting the viril-
ity of will to battle against odds." The result was "a new type—a most at-
tractive addition [who] can meet the male upon even terms."³²

The AAU in 1932 set up a National Women's Sports Committee to
investigate the charges that women's athletics were detrimental to
women's physical health.

The committee surveyed 232 top athletes, reporting that nearly
every one saw an overall health improvement and suffered no ill
effects on menstruation due to competition. . . . Respondents
firmly believed that the "competitive spirit" benefited rather than
harmed female athletes. Popular media accounts made fewer ref-
erences to political and maternal welfare, looking more often to
the matter of sexual attractiveness to explain the value of women's
sport. The announced benefits were double-sided: sport would en-
hance the sexual appeal of young women, at the same time height-
ening the viewing pleasure of audiences entranced by the
attractive female competitors. Journalists likened athletes to cho-
rus girls, movie stars, and beauty queens.³³

But by 1932, sports had truly become a luxury, even for factory girls.
In October 1929, the stock market crashed, plunging large sections of
the country into dire poverty.