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Introduction

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Introduction

FEW ACTIVITIES COMMAND a stronger presence in modern American culture than sport. Praised by society for its rehearsal of fundamental human movements and passions in recurring, unpredictable scripts, sport offers dreams of escape and testing grounds of endurance and courage, as well as of moral and physical development. Loved and played by millions, it enlivens our daily conversation with rich anecdote, vivid terminology and striking imagery. In a nostalgically charged society longing for simpler, more pristine times, we worship athletes from “Golden Ages” past as stars and heroes, even as gods, that exemplify the “promise” of American sport. Michael Jordan is perhaps the most recognized face in the world, just as Muhammad Ali’s was a generation ago. Sports are the cash cow of a pervasive international media that provides the mediating stories which link fans, athletes, coaches and home teams via satellite broadcasts, cable superstations, and pay-per-view television.

And yet, precisely because our acquaintance with sport is so intimate and commonsensical, it remains enigmatic. Sport has been described in literature and mythologized in art, songs, ballads, and epic poems since ancient times, but only recently have scholars scrutinized its cultural complexities. Ironically, sport languished as a physical rather than mental activity—outside the traditions of classroom and intellectual discourse—in American academe for nearly a century despite its prominence at the nation’s leading universities.¹ Prior to the 1940s scholars ignored the history of sport and leisure because most of them considered it a frivolous, anecdotal research interest that added little to the coherent national (political) narratives.²

Sport and leisure history’s belated rise to academic respectability was tied to the growing popularity of social history in the late 1960s and early 1970s when American scholarship itself was transformed. The anti-Vietnam War movement and the Civil Rights and Women’s movements in particular un-

1. For an excellent overview of 19th-century collegiate sport, see Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* (1988).

2. Frederic L. Paxson, “The Rise of Sports,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 4 (1917), 143-69; John A. Krout, *Annals of American Sport* (1929); Jennie Holliman, *American Sports, 1785-1835* (1931); Foster Rhea Dulles, *America Learns to Play: A History of Popular Recreations, 1607-1940* (1940); John R. Betts, “The Technological Revolution and the Rise of Sport, 1850-1900,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 40 (1953), 231-56; “Mind and Body in Early American Thought,” *Journal of American History*, 54 (1968), 787-805; and *America’s Sporting Heritage, 1850-1950* (1974); Harold Seymour, *Baseball*, 2 vols. (1960-71); and David Q. Voigt, *American Baseball*, 3 vols. (1966-83).

dermined the prevailing atmosphere of consensus and liberal self-righteousness in both scholarly circles and wider society. A new generation of scholars, raised on a steady diet of commercialized mass culture, challenged many of the social and cultural assumptions in the craft. In particular, those who came of age in a society rife with social and political conflict rejected the notion that a history rooted in the ideas and actions of an elite group of politicians, lawyers, ministers, and intellectuals could speak for the rest of America. Armed with new assumptions, questions, and topics, social historians shifted their attention from political events and great ideas to collective processes and the experiences of everyday life. They borrowed liberally from European historians in both the Marxist and *Annales* schools, as well as from anthropologists and sociologists who theorized on such critical concepts as "society," "class," "culture," and "power." In turn, historians broadened the concept of culture which meant that sport, like popular culture generally, would eventually find its historians. It did so quickly. Within a decade, several new journals and monographic series heralded the burgeoning field of sport history.³

By the end of their first decade's efforts, sport and leisure scholars had reached some agreement on the areas of consensus and conflict in their subject. During the 1970s, most American sport historians situated their subject within the "modernization" paradigm that emphasized how the transformation of "traditional" sport (unorganized and tied to religious and agrarian rhythms) took on "modern" trappings (secularity, specialization, bureaucratization, standardization, and quantification) as society itself was transformed by industrialization and urbanization. But by the mid-1980s, the prevailing paradigm was criticized for its failure to dramatize sport's resistance to "modern" dictates. Although most scholars agreed on four essential groups of people who have remained constant to the narrative—athletes, patrons, spectators, and commentators—critics of modernization argued that important continuities in forms and meanings traversed time and context. Prominent ones include: competitiveness, creativity, physicality, and achievement; sport as craft and community; the persistence of gambling practices; the framing of games within festival, carnival and spectacle; and the erotic appeals in athletic performance.⁴

Today most historians put sport's historic transformation within a global capitalist system that slowly (and unevenly) changed the economic, social

3. The three best surveys of the "new" sport history are William J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, 2d ed. (1988); Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sport*, 2d ed. (1990); and Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports* (1993).

The North American Society for Sport History created the *Journal of Sport History* in 1974. The scope and quality of scholarship blossomed considerably with the appearance of the *British Journal of the History of Sports History* (1984)—now *International Journal of the History of Sport*—along with the creation of monographic series by Univ. of Illinois Press, Manchester Univ. Press, Oxford Univ. Press and, more recently, by Syracuse Univ. Press and SUNY Press.

4. The key synthetic work in this tradition is Allen Guttman's *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (1978). Guttman later wrote a popular rendition illuminating his provocative thesis, *A Whole New Ballgame: An Interpretation of American Sports* (1988). For a cogent, sympathetic review of Guttman's influence, see William J. Baker, "Touching All the Bases: The Record and Ritual of Allen Guttman," *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 8 (1991), 408-16. For a trenchant critique of Guttman's early

and cultural landscapes of North America and Europe. Rationalized production of agricultural and material goods disrupted traditional patterns of work and leisure; so too did accompanying Puritan, evangelical, and bourgeois work ethics which elevated work and despised frivolous play. Urban growth, fueled by massive immigration, raised widespread concerns about health and morality. Simultaneously, innovations in communications and transportation, state funding of urban play space and education, and increases in leisure time and discretionary income opened up markets for new or reformed sport products.⁵

If capitalism provided a new framework for sport and leisure, then the main agents of change were entrepreneurs and professional experts who packaged and sold events, equipment, instruction, facilities, and attitudes about sport. But as scholars have demonstrated, they were not alone. While participation and influence have always been uneven, today's games are the products of negotiations among players, spectators, commentators, coaches, and administrators, as well as among classes, genders, races, and nationalities. In sum, sport scholars typically tie change or continuity in sport's "interior" (e.g., game forms, equipment, ideologies) to some wider context (e.g., historical crises, political economy, race, class, and gender relations).⁶

Contrary to popular wisdom, historians have demonstrated that there never was a "golden age" when sports were played just for fun, recreation, or for developing positive values and social attitudes. As far back as the ancient Greeks, sports promoted questionable values and behaviors such as gambling, profiteering, extraordinary privilege, and competition that often ended in maiming or death. In fact, some sport historians now conceive of a dual history—a linear one that traces the growth of teams, leagues, rule and administrative changes; and a cyclical history of memory and emotional attachments. As historian Stephen Fox concludes succinctly, "The linear history duplicates American life . . . yet the cyclical history . . . inverts

work, see Richard Gruneau, "Freedom and Constraint: The Paradoxes of Play, Game and Sports," *Journal of Sport History*, 7 (1980), 68-86; and Stephen Hardy, "Entrepreneurs, Structures, and the Sportgeist: Old Tensions in a Modern Industry," in Donald Kyle and Gary Stark, eds., *Sport History and Sport Mythology* (1990).

5. The key works which established the contours of 19th-century American sport are: Ted Vincent, *Mudville's Revenge: The Rise and Fall of American Sport* (1981); Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-1870* (1986); George B. Kirsch, *The Creation of American Team Sports: Baseball and Cricket, 1838-1872* (1989); Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (1986); Peter Levine, *A.G. Spalding and the Rise of Baseball: The Promise of American Sport* (1985); Stephen Hardy, *How Boston Played: Recreation and Community, 1865-1915* (1982); and Donald Mrozek, *Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910* (1983).

6. Stephen Hardy, "Sport," in Peter N. Stearns, ed., *Encyclopedia of Social History* (1994), 713-14; Steven W. Pope, "Negotiating the 'Folk Highway' of the Nation: Sport, Public Culture and American Identity, 1870-1940," *Journal of Social History*, 27 (1993), 327-40; Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (1989); and Richard Butsch's and John Clarke's essays in Butsch, ed., *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption* (1990), 3-44.

The most influential works on leisure in American history include: John Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (1978); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (1983); Lewis Ehrenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (1983); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (1986); and Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988). See also Gary Cross, *A Social History of Leisure Since 1600* (1990) for a useful overview.

American life, turns it inside out.”⁷ The cyclical history of sport is about “golden ages” and heroes which are created to affirm comfortable notions of society and popularize idealized versions of history that serve the purposes of the present. Every generation, in other words, has its “golden age.”

The revolution in sport and leisure history reverberated much more powerfully within the humanities than in the applied sciences of physical education and kinesiology where the study of athleticism had been traditionally situated. Although less dramatic and far-reaching, the field of literary studies experienced renewed vigor in sports-oriented scholarship as a younger, perhaps more petulant group of scholars challenged the bastions of canonical authority by daring to take sports literature seriously. Although much sports literature since the nineteenth century was veritable “pulp fiction”—the work of didactic writers for juvenile readers—Michael Oriard, Gerald Early, Robert Higgs and others demonstrated how “serious” authors have also used sports as a ready-made source of allusion, metaphor, and symbol, as well as a pervasive context in which to explore the best and worst of the national character.⁸ F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* are representative of, in Early’s words, the “very imposition of our national character and our national myth”: blacks, Jews, and Catholics as athletes and sportsmen in *The Sun Also Rises*; the fake yachtsman, fake polo player Gatsby, whose name change resonates with ethnic overtones; the rich, hard Yale football star, Tom Buchanan, self-centered and racist; the woman’s golf pro Jordan Baker, who cheats and feels no responsibility for her recklessness. As Early concludes, these two novels represent the unraveling of the American myth through sports.⁹

Clearly, sport is entertainment, but it also provides mystery, suspense, high drama, and models by which we live. Within the story of sports are countless episodes that shed light on who we are as individuals and as a community. In short, athletics and leisure illustrate both our diversity and our common culture. It has become a cliché to say that sports are the *lingua franca* of people talking across divisions of class and race. Sports also reveal just how interdependent particular subcultures and the larger consumer cul-

7. Stephen Fox, *Big Leagues: Professional Baseball, Football, and Basketball in the National Memory* (1994), 208-09. Goldstein was the first to articulate this thesis in his *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball* (1989).

8. See Robert J. Higgs and Neil D. Isaacs, eds., *The Sporting Spirit: Athletes in Literature and Life* (1977); Higgs, *Laurel & Thorn: The Athlete in American Literature* (1981); Christian Messenger, *Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction: Hawthorne to Faulkner* (1981); Michael Oriard, *Dreaming of Heroes: American Sports Fiction, 1868-1980* (1982); Oriard, *Sporting with the Gods: The Rhetoric of Play and Games in American Culture* (1991); and David L. Vanderwerken and Spencer J. Wertz, eds., *Sport Inside Out: Readings in Literature and Philosophy* (1985).

See, for instance, Bernard Malamud, *The Natural* (1952); Mark Harris, *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1956); John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (1960); Robert Coover, *The Universal Baseball Association* (1968); Frederick Exley, *A Fan’s Notes* (1968); Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (1972); Jason Miller, *That Championship Season* (1972); Peter Gent, *North Dallas Forty* (1973); Philip Roth, *The Great American Novel* (1973); W.P. Kinsella, *Shoeless Joe* (1982); Eric Rolfe Greenberg, *The Celebrant* (1983); as well as the noteworthy writing of Norman Mailer and Joyce Carol Oates on boxing.

9. Early, *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (1994), 136.

ture can be—as the popular recent films *White Men Can't Jump* and *Hoop Dreams* dramatized the symbiotic ties between inner-city amateur basketball and the National Basketball Association. Sports are also about gender, although until recently, this often has been ignored. Certainly athletics have shaped American masculinity. For women, organized sports became available as feminism grew and they gained access to higher education and other areas from which they previously had been excluded. Rebecca Lobo and her UCONN teammates' triumph in last year's NCAA women's basketball championship marked not only a century of the game's steady development but showcased its traditional foothold in northeastern environs since women took up the sport at Vassar, Smith, Mount Holyoke, and Wellesley Colleges in the 1890s. The essays in this special issue of the *Quarterly* clearly show that sport and leisure can be investigated from a variety of perspectives.¹⁰

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10. Elliott J. Gorn and Michael Oriard, "Taking Sports Seriously," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 24, 1995, A52.