March 1996

The Neighborhood Athletic Club: An Ethnographic Study of a Working-Class Athletic Fraternity in Chicago, 1917-1984

Gerald R. Gems

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 32, no.1, March 1996, p.36-44

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
The Neighborhood Athletic Club:
An Ethnographic Study of a Working-Class Athletic Fraternity in Chicago,
1917-1984

By GERALD R. GEMS

THE COLD AND SOMBER weather on January 21, 1984 provided a fitting backdrop for the funeral that marked both the end of a life and a community institution in Chicago. The conditions reflected the emotional state of the participants, residents of the Lake View neighborhood. The violence that caused the death resulted in the revocation of the liquor license of the bar in which it occurred and the closure of the athletic club it sponsored. The demise of the club represented not only the termination of a neighborhood tradition, but the destruction of yet another piece of working-class culture, which the bar and its teams had sustained over the better part of the century.¹

Working-class culture has drawn the increasing attention of the latest generation of historians, but largely within the realm of labor relations or politics. Yet one cannot hope to understand the nature and persistence of class differences in America without examining the values and practice of sport so integral to working-class culture. The documentary film Hoop Dreams provided a poignant and telling example of such a need. University of Chicago studies initially explored cultural differences in the early part of the century. Frederic Thrasher examined more than a thousand gangs, or so-called social athletic clubs, during the 1920s. Ernest Burgess followed with sociological studies of working-class ethnics.² This examination continues the evolution of that process in a case study of one working-class neighborhood and a particular athletic club. It provides insight into the nature of working-class rhythms and lifestyles, personal and communal identities, world views and value systems which exhibited little change over time.

Athletic clubs had been common in the area known as Lake View since German immigrants founded turner societies in the 1880s.³ Students at Lake

View High School also formed their own athletic clubs for interscholastic competition in 1884. The local Catholic church, St. Alphonsus, established in 1857, also sponsored fraternal and social clubs for its parishioners and, by the turn of the century, fielded teams in a Catholic athletic league.

Social athletic clubs derived from the bachelor subculture that permeated American cities throughout the nineteenth century. Unlike the lavish athletic clubs of the upper classes, which were housed in new and elaborate buildings, the male working-class counterparts were usually headquartered in saloons, local building basements, or storefronts. Political patrons often sponsored clubs, and paid the rent and incidental expenses for uniforms and equipment. In exchange, club members worked the polls and provided muscle to deliver the vote on election day. Some clubs, such as Ragen’s Colts, enjoyed virtual immunity from prosecution due to their political ties, enabling them to construct an empire within the city. With a membership of more than two thousand the Colts ruled a large portion of the city, instilling fear in South Side residents for more than a decade. The typical club, however, had less than one hundred members; yet it too constructed its own hierarchical structure and a level of power within the neighborhood. Such organizations stood at odds with the values and practices of the upper classes.

The study of one such club, known in its early years as the Franklin Athletic Club, provides an insight into the nature of such working-class organizations. Although the origins of the club are unclear, it was founded during the World War I era and lasted through three generations. The Franklins apparently merged with elements of the Modocs, but it eventually billed itself as the Wizard Arrows Social Athletic Club. Chicago newspapers carried the Wizards’ football listings by 1917. Located in a German neighborhood, just north of Little Sicily (an area in the midst of transit during the 1920s), the club centered around the Louis Agassiz public school playground. Previously a middle-class community of merchants and skilled craftsmen, working-class immigrant families dominated the area by the Depression. Unlike many other clubs whose memberships derived from a single ethnic base, the Wizard Arrow teams reflected a polyglot, urban environment, inhabited mostly by Germans and Italians, Irish, Poles, Jews, and

5. *Chicago Daily News*, Nov. 20, 1902, 6; *New World*, Apr. 25, 1908, 26; Mar. 26, 1910, 1; *Chicago Tribune*, July 4, 1910, 11.
Greeks. Despite the misgivings of many ethnic parents, such interrelationships fostered assimilation with mainstream American society for second-generation immigrants while simultaneously reaffirming the physicality of life, hardship, and communal support networks, central to working-class culture. Social class began to replace ethnicity as the most cohesive factor within the neighborhood.

By the Depression the Wizard Arrows had become sufficiently prominent to secure the support of a ward politician, Joseph Gill, who supplied prestige and assistance. A storefront clubhouse, located on Lincoln Avenue, the main street through the community, remained a neighborhood fixture throughout the 1950s. Local merchants subscribed to club adbooks to market their wares at its games and dances. Club members offered patronage in return. Teams raised considerable funds through dances and raffles. The Wizard Arrows' elected officers administered club functions, organized events, and issued public challenges, usually in the newspapers, to other teams. While they sponsored teams in several sports, the football teams received the greatest emphasis and evoked the greatest pride. The Wizards sponsored two teams, a heavyweight contingent that competed in the city-wide semi-pro prairie league, and a lightweight team for younger members that served a recruiting and training function. As players aged or married they assumed coaching or managerial duties within the club.

The heavyweight team carried community pride throughout the city, while the lightweights often battled other area teams for local supremacy. Their fight song declared both their stature and their territoriality in proletarian verse:

We are the Wizard Arrows
And we come from Agassiz.
We play the best of teams that come around.
Pride of the prairie, the Wizard Arrow team,
We are the best team, the best you'll ever see.
Once we get started, we will never stop,
Pride of the prairie, the Wizard Arrow team.

9. Wizard Arrows information is gleaned from the personal papers of Frank Di Benedetto, a club officer, and from conversations with members, club records, team programs, dance programs, and newspaper accounts. On the ethnic bases of clubs, see Thrasher, *The Gang*, 130-54; and Frank De Liberto interview, Italians in Chicago Oral History Project, Special Collections at Univ. of Illinois at Chicago, 21-22 37, 44.

10. *Chicago American*, Oct. 9, 1935, 25; De Liberto interview, 25-26, 37-38; Zaranti interviews, Box 2, 13; Bruno interview, Box 3, 51-52; Sayler, “A Study of Behavior Problems of Boys,” 6-7, 26-27, 34; S. Kirson Weinberg, “Jewish Youth in the Lawndale Community,” Burgess Papers, Box 139, folder 3, 149-51; Seligs, “Study of the Basement Social Clubs of Lawndale,” 11, 15, all indicate that considerable sums were raised by such events, as evidenced by the $4,000 gained by the Vernon A.C., a South Side Italian club that hired Sophie Tucker to sing at its dance. Other groups used their clubs to house gambling operations, while some teams won more than $1,000 wagering on softball games, although $25 was more typical.


12. Lyrics supplied by Francis Patrick “Lefty” Dorgan, Gerald J. Gems, and Frank Di Benedetto, former club members.
The claiming of a particular territory, such as the Agassiz School playground, served as a challenge to nearby rivals and informed other clubs where games or bets might be arranged. Athletic contests provided for more than just psychic rewards. The heavyweights sometimes gathered gate receipts from games at enclosed fields, and the lightweights "passed the hat" for donations from spectators who lined the field perimeters. Such contests often took place in middle-class neighborhoods or in Lincoln Park, situated along affluent Lake Shore Drive. Younger siblings were trained as beggars to work the crowds during the games. Club members utilized such guile to outwit those that they perceived as more privileged. Frank Di Benedetto, a club officer, told the story of a local merchant who patronized the young men of the neighborhood by offering his store for clandestine drinking bouts. They took advantage of his hospitality to get him drunk, and, in his confusion, helped themselves to "discounted" merchandise. The store owner, however, had the last laugh. When each of the swindlers showed up for the next community dance, all dressed in the same suit and standing in a row, they appeared as wallpaper to the young women, who were unimpressed by their attempt at sartorial splendor.

Club members viewed petty theft as harmless, but when the Depression devastated the area, several neighborhood residents opted for a life of crime as armed robbers, even "holding up" the local stores in which the team members congregated. Most, however, relied on their athletic skills and physical prowess to maintain dignity, self-respect, and a measure of financial remuneration.

Toughness was always a necessity in working-class neighborhoods, and individual club members capitalized on that quality as boxers. Historian Elliott Gorn has stated that "pugilism was an autonomous expressive form that symbolically opposed the drift of modern society . . . boxing captured the values, the ethos, the distinct culture of countless working men who felt dispossessed. . . ." The same tendency remained as true in the 1930s as it did a century earlier. Middle-class reformers even saw boxing as a means to combat juvenile delinquency. Bishop Bernard Sheil, head of the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), stated, "We'll knock the hoodlum off his pedestal and we'll put another neighborhood boy in his place. He'll be dressed in C.Y.O. boxing shorts and a pair of leather mitts, and he'll make a new hero. Those kids love to fight. We'll let them fight. We'll find champions right in the neighborhood." Consequently, he organized the first city amateur boxing tournament in 1931. The Chicago Tribune also sponsored the Golden Gloves tournament and the CYO’s boxing program touched all of the city’s parishes.

The local St. Alphonsus team produced three CYO champions, including heavyweight Mike Adler, whose travels with the national team brought him prestige in the neighborhood. Adler toured the country in lavish style, but the improvement in his standard of living proved temporary. With the conclusion of his boxing career he reverted to positions in manual labor. The Wizard Arrow pugilists opted for more immediate remuneration by fighting as club boxers, earning as little as two or three dollars per fight. Prowess remained more important than prizes, however. At least two of them declined professional contracts, although one went on to become a champion in the army.

World War II curtailed the club's activities as many of its members served in the armed forces. When activities resumed after the war, the club was able to gather only one football team. The war affected other teams as well. In a more commercialized postwar environment only the most stable or politically connected ones survived. With fewer opponents the Wizard Arrows were unable to sustain their former vitality. As members married or moved away, the club maintained its neighborhood roots and ties in the clubhouse. Still a male preserve featuring a bar, pool table, and female pin-ups, members continued to frequent the club for camaraderie and supported colleagues' business ventures with their patronage. Although two of its members, Nick and Charlie Oliva, were hailed as the city billiard champions, by the mid-1950s the club had become more social than athletic. In the 1960s the drug culture invaded the Lake View community. Many former Wizard Arrows remained in the neighborhood, married to sisters of their teammates, but the club existed only in oral histories passed on to its members' offspring.

As the club members aged and their children grew, athletic competition shifted, temporarily, to the church where the Wizards were parishioners. St. Alphonsus offered a comprehensive athletic program for its 1500 students, including city-wide competition in the Catholic Youth Organization. Former Wizard Arrows served as coaches, particularly for the football team, which they headed for nearly twenty years.

The neighborhood regained some of its past athletic glory when the St. Alphonsus football team battled to the North Side championship game in 1962. The following year they were invited to play a charity game against the defending champions from the Maryville Orphanage at Lane Stadium. Spurred by such laurels, and mindful of their fathers' athletic exploits, the Wizard Arrow offspring resurrected the name and traditions of the club dur-

17. *New World*, Dec. 13, 1935, 16; Dec. 27, 1935, 9; *Chicago American*, Feb. 19, 1936, 25. Barney Ross and Martin Abramson, *No Man Stands Alone: The True Story of Barney Ross* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1957), 83, 87, provide insight into the status of Golden Gloves boxers and the widespread opportunities available to club fighters during the period. Adler initially received a job with the Catholic Youth Organization through the auspices of Bishop Sheil, its chief executive, but he returned to truck driving and construction work when his boxing days were over.

18. Frank Di Benedetto, personal papers, undated newspaper clippings.
ing their high-school years. The young Wizards lacked formal organization or a clubhouse, which relegated them to nightly street corner congregations. Wearing the hand-me-down jerseys of their fathers, they represented neighborhood agencies, such as churches or the Boys’ Club, in football, basketball, baseball, and softball until the Viet Nam War called many to military service. 19

Football again rekindled community pride after the war when former Lake View High School players organized a team to pursue the city park district championship. When remnants of that team were defeated in a sandlot game by the resurgent Wizard Arrows, they asked the victors to join in their enterprise. The merger unified rival athletic factions in the community (the Wizards of Agassiz Playground and the Hawthorne Athletic Association of Hawthorne Playground) that had persisted since the 1930s. 20 With a neighborhood bar owner as their patron, the unified team soon dominated the park district league in city-wide competition against other clubs and a junior college team. Averaging forty points per game, the team, known as Connie’s Vikings (a synthesis of the bar owner’s name and the dominant pro team of the period), easily captured successive city titles. Its only competition came from another neighborhood team, former St. Alphonsus players who represented Burley Playground a few blocks west of the church.

Looking for new challenges the Vikings petitioned the Cook County Football League, the lesser of two semi-pro circuits in the Midwest, for admission. The Burley team folded when its quarterback and another player went to prison on drug charges. Others joined the Vikings, and the team made an impact in its initial semi-pro game. Scheduled to play the defending champion Hellcats team, they shared adjoining locker rooms with the bigger, more established veteran players. The Hellcats purposely paraded through the Vikings, demeaning their manhood and football ability on the way to the field. The Hellcats’ 230 pound fullback wore a bow tie to start the game, as if he were attending a formal party. Such actions outraged the upstart Vikings, and spurred them on to a shocking 23-12 win over the defending champs.

That early promise of success disintegrated into factionalism within two years. The former Burley players, disgruntled over a lack of playing time, decided to reorganize their own team. After securing a local tavern known as the Chimney Sweep as their sponsor, they obtained a former Wizard Arrow as a coach. As the head coach of the St. Alphonsus football team for seventeen years, past president of its fathers’ club, and a champion boxer, he was a

19. Similar patterns are described in William Foote Whyte, Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1943). The Wizard Arrows’ children remained the core of the group, but others were accepted to maintain or strengthen athletic teams. One member drove nearly fifty miles round trip on a nightly basis to maintain his neighborhood ties after his family moved to the suburbs.

20. The Hawthorne club was active by the mid-1920s. See Chicago Daily Journal, Jan. 14, 1925.
well-known and respected figure in the community. One of his sons served as an assistant coach, while the other, an all-league player for the Vikings, immediately joined his father, bringing several key players with him to the new alliance. 21

Thereafter, the new organization, known as the Chicago Sweepers, operated much like the old Wizard Arrows club, which had been only a few blocks away. The coach served as club president and the oldest, and allegedly toughest, player, a former professional boxer, served as the sergeant-at-arms. All of its more than forty members came from working-class roots. Most were laborers or craftsmen engaged in construction work as was the coach, who was a plasterer. The sergeant-at-arms owned his own small roofing company, for which he hired teammates as employees. Another player owned a mortuary, but it fronted for his bookie operation. Only seven members had ever attended college, three of whom eventually graduated. Mostly Italian, German, and Irish in their ethnic origins, the Sweepers also included Mexicans and African-Americans in a significant departure from past club memberships within the neighborhood. The only woman with an active role in the organization, a nursing student who was a girlfriend of one of the players, served as the team “doctor.” Wives, girlfriends, family members, and other bar patrons provided a loyal following. 22

The bar’s large back room served as the team clubhouse. Like the Wizard Arrow clubhouse, the pool table remained the center of activity, where players had to prove themselves on a nightly basis. 23 Patrons maintained the working-class custom of buying rounds or “treating” friends to a drink, who were then obliged to reciprocate. 24 Similar to previous working-class clubs they solicited local merchants for ads in their programs and maintained the communal support network with their patronage. Raymond Williams termed such social and financial practices “residual” in that they were retained from the past and served to reinforce the values of an alternative culture. 25 Suburban middle-class teams in the league enjoyed greater capital resources through corporate or institutional support, while a larger midwestern association served as a minor league for professional taxi-squad players with commensurate funding. Players exhibited a distinct class consciousness when

21. The circumstances and style of leadership may have fit Gramsci’s characterization of the organic intellectual, one who is of and operates within the popular element. See Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith, eds., Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (New York: International Pub., 1971), 3-6.


24. This working-class tradition was already prevalent in the nineteenth century, as shown by Gorn, The Manly Art, 143.

facing suburban opponents. Despite their material advantages, the middle-class teams were perceived as physically inferior.  

The club fielded only a football team, symbolic of its communal function. It had little interest in other sports. Age, marriage, and transience brought attrition, but the coach’s retirement in 1976 doomed the enterprise. The Sweepers struggled on for another year under a former little All-American as a coach. They played well enough to make the playoffs, but rather than field an inferior product, and unable to raise escalating operating funds in a hard pressed local economy, the team withdrew from the league in 1978. Like the Wizard Arrows, the club persisted informally as a social organization. Despite a change in ownership the bar enjoyed the continued patronage of the coach and former players, one of whom eventually bought the business.

The working-class patterns and rhythms that centered around the neighborhood athletic club came to an abrupt end on January 19, 1984. The former sergeant-at-arms had befriended a neighborhood resident, recently paroled on a murder charge, and offered him a job with his roofing company. When the new employee got drunk that night, his boss tried to take away the gun that he carried lest he get into more trouble. Offering a ride home, the good Samaritan was rewarded with a shot to the head. The perpetrator barely escaped with his life as former team members beat him senseless and torched his car. Sam Joyce was buried in his football jersey two days later and a court soon closed the bar permanently. Neighborhood gentrification began to displace and disperse club members thereafter as the upper classes acquired inner-city properties close to downtown employment and nearby entertainment areas.  

Despite the changes wrought by a modern world, working-class life changed little in the century preceding the death. For working-class males life revolved around work, the bar, sport, and a very limited and local community. Within that community few achieved middle-class status and children faced the same circumstances as their parents. Those who aspired to white-collar work were chided with admonitions to “get a real job.” Education was perceived as of little value, but an athletic scholarship to college brought esteem.

With physicality so central to the value system, sport played a prominent part in working-class life. It served as a means of contact with a larger world,
a source of communal pride, and a vehicle for the assertion of particular class values. Football and boxing held particular esteem and athletes won status within the community as their feats were chronicled by raconteurs in neighborhood bars and gatherings. One had reputedly achieved the quickest knockout in Golden Gloves history, while another courageous Sweeper lineman collapsed in the huddle but refused to leave the game. He finished the season before being diagnosed with cancer. Both he and another player, who died a premature death due to a brain tumor, were buried with their football jerseys.29 Like their parents, sport remained central to communal and personal identity.

Unlike first-generation immigrants, however, sporting practices brought greater assimilation as multiple ethnic representatives merged within the club. Gambling and the entrepreneurial activities associated with sporting practices allowed club members a measure of independence from the traditional family structures of the past. The success of such endeavors, coupled with the lack of any European memories, gave second-generation ethnics and their offspring little reason to question the capitalist system. Sport, more so than work, provided a means to greater socioeconomic status, albeit a temporary one.30

Yet, for the working class, bourgeois life seemed irrelevant. Life was hard and often short. They preferred immediate gratification and lived for today rather than the middle-class caution of saving for tomorrow. While laborers aspired to greater material comforts they resisted change and refused to accept alternative value systems. Over the three generations encompassed by this study many neighborhood families resided within a few blocks of their birthplaces. The emphasis on the body as the source of physical pleasures dictated the choice of occupation and leisure, reinforcing class differences. Drinking and sport remained their primary leisure activities. Each generation replicated a pre-existing working-class culture in which sport provided the means to promote individual stature, local pride, and communal solidarity, and affirm class-specific beliefs and principles, while maintaining a traditional existence within a modernizing outside world.31

30. Groups such as the German Turners, Polish Falcons, and Czech Sokols transcended class lines in their membership, but clearly pursued nationalistic agendas in their sporting practices. See Peter Levine, Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 30-33, for sport as a means to celebrate ethnicity; and David Nasaw, Children of the City: At Work and at Play (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1985), 131, 195, on street culture and intergenerational transition.
31. Tomlinson, “Good Times, Bad Times, and the Politics of Leisure,” 44; and Steve W. Pope, “Negotiating the ‘Folk Highway’ of the Nation: Sport, Public Culture and American Identity, 1870-1940,” Journal of Social History (Dec. 1993), 327-40, on the ability of subordinate groups to negotiate or construct their own culture within a more dominant system.