

Sport in America Series

# SPORT *in* AMERICA

From Colonial Leisure to  
Celebrity Figures and Globalization

■ VOLUME II ■



*David K. Wiggins*

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**HUMAN KINETICS**

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*To the memory of my mother,  
Lurline Wiggins (1927-2008),  
who helped instill in me  
a love of sport and the good life.*

# PREFACE

Some 15 years have passed since the publication of *Sport in America: From Wicked Amusement to National Obsession*. During that time significant progress has been made in sport history; an increasing number of articles, book chapters, and monographs are being published on a variety of compelling topics. These aforementioned works, written by well-known academicians from disciplines such as history, kinesiology, and American studies, have been disseminated in prestigious peer-reviewed academic journals, more popular commercial presses, and notable university presses that have, in some cases, established special series devoted to various aspects of sport.

Volume II of *Sport in America: From Colonial Leisure to Celebrity Figures and Globalization* includes, with some notable exceptions, many works that have been published since the 1995 edition. Although it is impossible to include works that cover every topic and use every methodological approach, I have chosen essays that are well written and thoroughly researched and cover a wide range of timely and thought-provoking topics. The essays include diverse topics such as horse racing among the Virginia gentry, Muhammad Ali's involvement in the Nation of Islam, and the interconnection between sport and the World War I military experience and the role of Jews in the reintegration of Major League Baseball.

## Intended Audience

Volume II can be used as a stand-alone text in undergraduate and graduate sport history courses. However, it is primarily designed to supplement the survey texts assigned for those courses. For example, it can serve as an accompaniment to such standard survey texts as Benjamin Rader's *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators* (2008); Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein's *A Brief History of American Sports* (2004); and Gerald R. Gems, Linda J. Borish, and Gertrude Pfister's *Sports in American History: From Colonization to Globalization* (2008). Such use of this work will allow students an opportunity to examine topics in more depth and realize a greater understanding of sport and how it is intertwined with other societal institutions. It both reflects and illuminates deep-seated stereotypic notions about such sensitive and controversial issues as race, gender, and masculinity. This book can have a wider audience than just those students enrolled in sport history courses. The larger public will have an interest in and benefit from the essays because they are easily accessible, are devoid of the jargon that sometimes characterizes academic work, and include

information that is relevant to contemporary sport specifically and today's world in general.

## Notes on Volume II

This book includes 18 reprinted essays, all of which contain their original footnotes and are divided into six parts. (The photographs that accompany each article are not original to the article but are added to illustrate the chapter.) To provide the proper historical context and to give readers a better idea of the changes that have taken place in sport over time, the articles are arranged chronologically from the early American period to the present day. At the same time, the articles in each of the six parts of the book provide readers with an understanding of the role and pattern of sport at particular moments in American history and how sport is interconnected with other societal institutions and cultural changes. After a brief introduction, each section includes a list of suggested readings to give readers an understanding of the quality and wide-ranging nature of the secondary literature dealing with the history of American sport.

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## PART I

# THE PATTERN OF SPORT IN EARLY AMERICA, 1607-1776

**S**port in early America was marked by significant geographical differences. Religion, climate, topography, patterns of work, and a host of other factors would have a profound effect on where sport would flourish. Some parts of the country received sport well and others were less receptive, ambivalent, or even opposed to sport. Perhaps no part of the country was more ambivalent about sport than New England. As Bruce C. Daniels notes in chapter 1, "Sober Mirth and Pleasant Poisons: Puritan Ambivalence Toward Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England," the Puritans provided "ambiguous messages to their own society and to future generations" in regard to leisure, recreation, and sport. Although they could support these activities in principle, particularly if they refreshed the body and soul, the Puritans often cautioned or railed against them for a combination of religious, economic, sociological, and political reasons. For example, they were adamantly opposed to the theater, believing it was unproductive and led to homosexuality. They believed the Sabbath should be devoted to religious observance and not festive celebrations, recreation, or sport. They condemned all forms of gambling and blood sports as well as football because they believed these activities fostered idleness and resulted in injuries and bitter rivalries. The Puritans condemned such games as handball

and tennis because of their association with the Roman Catholic Church and the idle nobility. However, they supported activities and competitions that they considered productive or virtuous. For example, hunting and fishing produced food, and the competitions of running, wrestling, and marksmanship were part of military training and led to the “civic virtue of promoting health and defense as well as providing recreation for the men on militia training days.”

This skepticism and condemnation of many types of recreation and sport were nowhere to be found in the colonial South. Because of the heterogeneous nature of its population, religious background, racial composition, rural environment, and agricultural economy, the South generally took its leisure very seriously and was enthusiastic about participation in an assortment of recreation and sports. One group that was particularly enthusiastic about these activities was the gentry of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Virginia, especially if it included making bets with large sums of money and tobacco on horse racing. In chapter 2 Timothy Breen provides a provocative explanation about why gambling, especially on horse racing, was so important to the gentlemen of Virginia during this time period in his essay “Horses and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling Among the Gentry of Virginia.” Taking a cue from Clifford Geertz’s famous analysis of the Balinese cockfight, Breen argues that when the great planters of Virginia staked large amounts of money and tobacco on a favorite horse, it was not simply a pastime but a reflection of the “core elements of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century gentry values.” These core elements consisted of competitiveness, individualism, and materialism.

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## CHAPTER 1

# SOBER MIRTH AND PLEASANT POISONS

## Puritan Ambivalence Toward Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England

■ *Bruce C. Daniels* ■

A culture at play tells much about itself. Patterns of leisure and recreation do not develop by accident; invariably they are manifestations of a society's core values. Unfortunately, assaying the meaning of specific patterns of leisure and recreation is seldom easy. Scholars often assert—virtually as a matter of faith—that pleasurable pastimes provide significant clues to a culture's inner workings, but then find the meaning of the clues puzzling and elusive.<sup>1</sup>

In particular, people have sought to understand the culture of the United States by analyzing how its citizens relax.<sup>2</sup> Americans at play, however, send ambivalent signals both to themselves and to the international community. On the one hand, they pursue pleasure relentlessly—even wantonly. Licitious, narcissistic, hedonistic—all of these adjectives could be used to describe behavior that revolves around sexuality, individual gratification, and conspicuous consumption of everything. A large portion of music and film exaggerate reality and promote a picture of American decadence. Yet, on the other hand, many people, particularly foreigners, feel that Americans do not know how to play *properly*. According to this view, the seeming American hedonism in truth camouflages an inability to relax. Co-existing with the American attitudes of freedom of expression and behavior are deeper feelings that bespeak a repressive, censorious morality. Thus, bath-tub gin can be explained as a product of abstemious temperance; sex on the movie screen reflects sophomoric insecurities; the frenetic chase for fun parallels the rat-race pace of work. Americans

work too hard at play, a sure sign that they are not very good at it. They take their leisure and recreation like they take their role in the world—too seriously.<sup>3</sup>

When either foreign or American commentators search the past for clues to the American identity, a number of explanatory factors surface with regularity; among these, for example, are the frontier, abundance, immigration, and the short span of American history. Predictably, considerations of morality and pleasure begin with a short discussion about or diatribe against Puritanism. Something about Puritanism has fascinated—perhaps fixated—is a more appropriate term—the historical imagination. The general storyline of the popular analysis goes as follows. Political freedom, individualism, a fluid class structure, prosperity, geographical mobility—all of these factors and others fuel an American drive towards hedonism. But, lurking just beneath this surface gaiety, a cluster of attitudes derived from the Puritan origins prevent Americans from truly enjoying themselves. Despite their apparent carefree pursuit of pleasure, Americans have always been and still are chained to guilt, sanctimony, harsh judgments and hypocrisy by their Puritan past. As the French paper *Le Monde* wrote recently in a front page editorial on the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill scandal, “since the arrival of the pilgrim fathers, America has never truly settled its account with sin. The old Puritan heritage periodically surges forth from the collective memory.”<sup>4</sup> Much of the popular culture, however, still associates Puritanism with dour prudery. And, modern literary figures as distinguished as Arthur Miller and Robert Lowell reinforce this perception.<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary historians have developed a view of Puritanism in opposition to this popularly-held view. Puritans enjoyed sex, beer, and time free from work. They may have been harsh in judging sinners, but they were clear and fair-minded when they applied standards, not bigoted and hypocritical. Most professional historians attribute any ascetic, prudish qualities in American life to double-standards created by Victorian Americans in the late nineteenth century. Puritans have been relieved of blame by scholars who have reassigned the historical burden to the more recent past.

Why are literary and popular cultures at such odds with recent historical interpretations? Have historians overstated Puritanism’s capacity to pursue pleasure through leisure and recreation? These questions have been raised by several recent analyses of Puritan attitudes towards sex which suggest that professional historians may have “over corrected” in their efforts to rehabilitate the Puritans. In an attempt to place Puritan attitude in a more sophisticated context, historians may have replaced one stereotype with another: both the gloomy, religious fanatic and the relaxed, moderate Puritan may be equally ahistorical images.<sup>6</sup>

I believe that both of these historical figures—the gloomy fanatic and the relaxed moderate—fail to personify the complexity of Puritan attitudes towards leisure and recreation. And, by this I do not mean that Puritans said one thing but did another. That was to be expected. Scholars know, as did Puritans, that a gap existed between ideals and practice in all societies; such a gap merely reflects the human condition. Recent social historians have done much to mea-



sure the distance between practice and preaching in New England by assessing criminality and deviance. It was within the preaching itself, however, that the real complexity existed. The Puritan ideal of leisure and recreation contained an ambivalence of profound importance. Puritans had a problem articulating their ideal of appropriate leisure and recreation. This problem resulted in ambiguous messages to their own society and to future generations.

## **Puritan Ambivalence**

For a people remarkably consistent in their commitment to build a society based on Scriptural blueprint, New England's Puritans pursued their grand goal with a high degree of ambivalence over strategies, values, and secondary purposes. A series of conflicting, contradictory impulses underlay much of this ambivalence: Puritans believed in conformity to doctrine but also in liberty of conscience; they worked for material prosperity but wanted to avoid worldly temptations; they prized social communalism but asserted economic individualism. Each of these pairs (among others) provided alternatives that competed for loyalty both within society as a whole and within the hearts and mind of individuals. The leadership usually pretended no conflict existed and tried to fit these divisions into a coherent whole. They argued, for example, that people should use their liberty of conscience to arrive at the same doctrine as the ministerial elite. Yet, the contradictions did not go away in the seventeenth century; they resurfaced continually in both ideology and in practice. In reality, they resurfaced because Puritans neither had the desire nor the ability to make these hard choices. Hence, they did not line up on either side of the alternatives for a showdown, but tried instead to make all the contradictions fit together comfortably. They could not.

Puritan attitudes towards recreation and leisure reflected the ambivalence produced by those conflicting impulses. On the one hand, Puritans were virtually unanimous in stressing that all people needed relaxation to refresh their body and soul. As John Cotton, the most influential minister of the founding generation wrote, "life is not life, if it be overwhelmed with discouragements...wine it [is] to be drunken with a cheerful heart...thy wife beloved and she be joyfully lived withal, all the days of thy vanity." Cotton was quick to add, however, that enjoyment of drink and love did not extend to "gluttony and drunkenness...swaggering and debauch ruffians."<sup>7</sup> In these cautions we see the manifestations of the Puritan's general ambivalence towards relaxation. Support of recreation and leisure in rhetoric was almost always accompanied by cautions against ungodly, unlawful, unreasonable or unproductive activities. As if the very assertion threatened to open the floodgates to Hell, almost every endorsement of pleasure and fun was hedged about with restrictions of its actual exercise. William Bradford, John Winthrop, Thomas Shepard, Thomas Hooker, among most other early leaders, took great care in their writings to identify the limits of lawful recreation and to cite the many examples of fellow New Englanders who had exceeded these limits. A generation later in 1684, Increase Mather