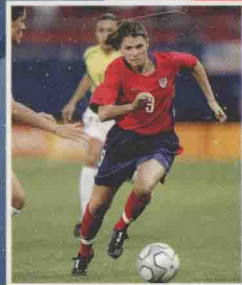
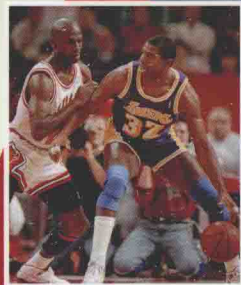
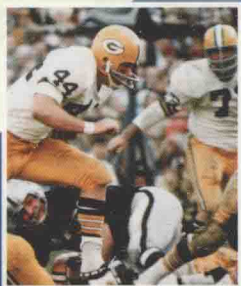


American History through

AMERICAN SPORTS

From Colonial Lacrosse
to Extreme Sports

DANIELLE SARVER COOMBS
and BOB BATCHELOR



Volume One

Creating Sports Culture: Beginnings

American History through American Sports

From Colonial Lacrosse to Extreme Sports

Volume I

Creating Sports Culture: Beginnings

Danielle Sarver Coombs and Bob Batchelor



 PRAEGER

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Danielle Sarver Coombs
Kent, Ohio

Creating a three-volume anthology like *American History through American Sports* might seem like a solitary task. Actually, this collection would not exist without a stellar team behind it. Thanks first to my co-editor, Danielle S. Coombs, for her vision in bringing this collection to life. In our short time together at Kent State University, Danielle and I have become great friends and colleagues. This is the first of many such collaborations.

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American History through American Sports would not have seen the light of day without the steady, enthusiastic support of our editors at ABC-CLIO. Initially, my good friend Dan Harmon shepherded the collection. Thanks to Dan for his professionalism and friendship. James Sherman took over as the project took flight, and we certainly appreciate his steady guidance and stewardship. Thanks too to ABC-CLIO leadership for the company's unwavering commitment to popular culture studies. In a world of shrinking publishing opportunities, ABC-CLIO provides a high-quality publishing platform for scholars in many disciplines.

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Bob Batchelor
Munroe Falls, Ohio

Introduction:

American History through American Sports

Using the Super Bowl as a barometer of America's sports obsession is almost too easy. The last three championship games, culminating in 2012's Super Bowl XLVI, rank as the most watched television shows in history, displacing long-time leader *M*A*S*H*. The New York Giants 21–17 victory over the New England Patriots reached 111.3 million viewers. NBC, the game's home network, claimed that a total of 177 million viewers watched at least six minutes of the game, which accounts for roughly 56 percent of the entire population.¹

Given figures like these, it is difficult to argue that sports are anything but the backbone or driving narrative of modern America. Though some sports observers, historians, and commentators argue over which sport dominates the national obsession (with football usually at the top), we assert that the real American pastime has moved beyond the popularity of a single sport to watching sports as a whole. This new interpretation, which interweaves many connected aspects of contemporary popular culture, is driven by technology and innovation, from one's ability to watch sporting events on cell phones and tablet computers to the high-tech wizardry that makes it possible to watch a game on a 70-inch, high definition TV or even in 3-D.

Again, professional football serves as an exemplar when examining America's sports viewing fanaticism. Although the NFL season technically runs from late summer through February's Super Bowl championship, the sport generates news all year, picked up by various local, regional, and national cable stations, such as ESPN, Fox regional channels, and the NFL Network. During the 2011 season, several socioeconomic and cultural factors contributed to high viewership. The difficult economy, for instance, made watching football at home a cheap alternative to going out. In addition, the electronics industry's holiday season price-cutting on big screen

televisions and other gadgetry gave people viewing opportunities via high definition broadcasts.

Astoundingly, 23 of the top 25 telecasts in 2011 were NFL games. According to the Associated Press, “a total of 37 games drew at least 20 million viewers each.” Imagine if each person donated \$1 to charity for each game watched; some \$740 million would have flowed into charitable coffers during football season alone.² When one takes into account the number of games viewed on cell phones, laptops, and other stand-alone devices, this number soars.

Another figure that escalates nearly beyond comprehension is the amount of money gamblers wage on the Super Bowl. A *Wall Street Journal* report estimated that about \$90 million would be wagered legally through Las Vegas sports books in 2012. However, this number could be doubled, tripled, or more if one accounts for the range of bets that actually take place, from offshore, Web-based betting firms to small office pools and individual bets (nearly all technically illegal).³

Moreover, to really boggle the mind, consider that gambling on the penultimate NFL matchup is a drop in the bucket (perhaps not even 10 percent) in comparison to the total money bet legally and illegally in the United States. In 2009 the *Economist* estimated that legal bets on all sports in Las Vegas reached about \$2.6 billion. Based on these figures, the amount of money exchanging hands in America and globally via gambling is staggering.⁴ If the American sports gambling scene were considered a corporation, it would rank as one of the larger in the world.

Using the Super Bowl and professional football as a guide is just one way to demonstrate the ubiquity of sports in the contemporary world. When we take the subject of professional football and broaden it across all the sports that occupy the American mind today, we see the totality in virtually every area of a person’s life. Not only does sports take center stage in people’s viewing world, but it influences what they do with their leisure time (actually playing themselves or other means of interacting), how they spend money, what products they purchase and why, and how they create a personal worldview.

For most Americans, the sports fixation begins almost at birth (infant clothes adorned with team logos), runs through K–12 education (school activities centered on sporting events and athletic participation), is cemented in college (fanaticism and loyalty to the alma mater), and then is extended in adulthood (leisure time focused on sports and games). Taken as a whole, the narrative strains that coalesce to create the United States are all replicated or solidified in the sports world: heroism, good versus

evil, pride, community, and patriotism. In other words, the notion of sports as a way of life dominates America's cultural landscape, just as it has been vital to the nation's history.

The need for a single collection that examines, analyzes, and assesses sports from a historical and cultural perspective drives the work contained in *American History through American Sports: From Colonial Lacrosse to Extreme Sports*. This three-volume anthology is unique. It focuses on how the "Big Four" American sports (baseball, football, basketball, and hockey) and sports outside the mainstream have transformed and influenced society at large and vice versa, because there is constant reaction and interaction among sports, history, and culture. This collection demonstrates how sports, history, and popular culture are fundamentally interwoven and in turn reflect larger societal transformations taking place throughout history.

The reader will soon discover that the essays in this collection are not boring, straightforward accounts of a topic or theme. Such sports history, sport-specific volumes, and biographies and autobiographies are readily available, virtually flooding the marketplace as each individual season begins. Instead, as editors we tasked the contributors to take a stand on the issues raised in their entries, infusing their thoughtfully researched work with crisp arguments and sophisticated, insightful analysis. As a result, readers may not agree with all that they encounter in *American History through American Sports*, but they will uncover new ways of looking at sports, history, and culture.

AMERICAN SPORTS, AMERICAN DREAMS

Athletic success is an essential facet of the American dream. The central notion—that achieving greatness in sports through determination will lead to a better life—is played out on courts, fields, parks, and courses nationwide. This scenario occupies the minds of countless young athletes. It is little wonder that one of the first statements heard from many of those who achieve stardom is that they plan to buy a home for a family member, usually their mothers, who sacrificed some parts of their own lives for the stars' success.

The notion that victory leads to a trip to Disney, new cars, a house for mom, or some other material gain is so pervasive in sports culture that it is essentially a cliché. However, the principle of the American dream necessitates a payoff on a grand scale that justifies the years, decades, and lifetime dedicated to achievement and athletic prowess.

For some athletes, the hard work begins in dark, musky weight rooms, while for others it is logging mile after mile, running on back roads and through neighborhoods through oppressive heat, driving snow, or rain, just getting in a little better shape than one's competitors, fixating on that one extra step or bit of power that leads to victory. Regardless of the sport, the guiding principle is that determination and perseverance enable the athlete to maximize his or her natural talents, leading to athletic achievement.

In the United States, we shower those who embody these traits with trophies, medals, scholarships, and riches. They are held up as exemplars in their communities and, if they are talented enough, go on to represent themselves and their sports on larger stages. There is a certain "Americanness" to the way people promote and support young athletes on their way to college scholarships and beyond, wrapping them in the community flag, exuding civic and local pride in the exploits of young people. Driving through just about any community in America, one finds road signs, placards, and in some cases, even statues honoring high school championship teams, Olympic medal winners, and other team and individual winners.

The sports-related American dream is intricately linked to both nostalgia and the centrality of celebrity culture in contemporary society. Across mass communications, programming, texts, and images draw audiences to sports via emphasis on past glory and exceptional individuals. Critics might view nostalgia's lure or the fascination with celebrity as a kind of broad self-persuasion or even delusion, but a more positive outlook is that people use the past to make sense of their own lives and events.

According to scholar Christine Sprengler, "[Nostalgia] tells us something about our own historical consciousness, about the myths we construct and circulate and about our desire to make history meaningful on a personal and collective level."⁵ In sports, the use of nostalgia to link culture and history creates a grander narrative. The challenge, however, is in understanding that nostalgia can drift into camp or romanticism and, perhaps more important, be employed to create stories that accentuate ideas on the fringes or unacceptable to mainstream society.

Analyzing sports, history, and culture, one quickly recognizes that the sports world emphasizes and reinforces grand narratives that not only help define societal norms, but also enable individuals to interpret their interior and exterior worlds. Scholar Andrew C. Miller, for example, investigates the connections among film, masculinity, and the American dream, explaining, "[T]he sports film genre coalesces around underdog-to-champion,

hard-work-leads-to-victory narratives that shape sporting cinema and help to forge a masculine ideal closely intertwined with an ‘Athletic American Dream’.”⁶

In this instance, one clearly identifies how the tropes Americans employ in understanding themselves and society are built or mirrored in sports popular culture. On an even deeper level, people use these narratives and similar ones to create, envision, and attempt to operationalize their goals and aspirations. The enduring popularity of sports films and continued use of sports themes in novels, television shows, and other media demonstrate how deeply ingrained these grand narratives are within American popular culture.

TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE

Technology and culture beat on, hand in hand, across history. Like so many aspects of American life, technology has played a critical role in sports, for both participants and fans. Many of the improvements made to equipment, apparel, and other components have transformed the games themselves.

The influence of Tiger Woods aside, innovations in both golf clubs and golf balls have changed the way players approach the sport. The added length derived from changes to equipment enables players to hit the ball farther than in past eras. In addition, many golfers have responded to the technological improvements by enacting rigorous fitness programs designed to enhance their ability to hit the ball far. As a result, younger and more athletic individuals are pursuing golf careers, which then changes the kinds of fans who watch the sport. In turn, advertisers and sponsors pump money into golf based on its appeal to a younger demographic. Top this off by countless mass communications channels created to provide golf coverage and garner advertising dollars, and one sees the tight connection among technology, the capitalistic sports industry, and fandom.

With all the positive influences, however, emerge new challenges. Of the many consequences resulting from increased coverage of sports on the Web, cable television, and other media, one of the most difficult to alleviate is the unyielding pressure placed on young athletes to market themselves and their skills. The common refrain is that today’s young athletes throughout the K–12 system are over-coached, play too many games despite health risks, and are forced to “specialize” in one sport early so that they do not “fall behind” others who also specialize.

Entire industries have emerged that exist basically to place the spotlight on youngsters, such as summer baseball and basketball camps, where college coaches can attend, but technically not recruit, as if the players do not recognize these coach/celebrities. In some cases, the potential payoff for young stars and those around them leads to shady business practices among unethical sports agents; college coaches; sneaker and athletic apparel executives; and the parents, guardians, and coaches who allow this behavior to take place.

Demonstrating how the most vulnerable are targeted, much of the criticism of young athletic leagues—barely sanctioned by any governing body of note—is justified when inner-city, African American youths are made promises by unscrupulous adults, often without regard to an athlete’s future development outside sports. The lure of money, scholarships, and giant shoe contracts is tantalizing for youngsters being touted as the next Jordan/Kobe/LeBron and their families. The challenge is accentuated when the vision of future success and payoff is tied to the language and symbols of the American dream.

Although it seems hard to imagine a scenario in which technology plays a greater role in athletic success than contemporary America, scholars Timothy Marjoribanks and Karen Farquharson imagine a time when technology plays an even greater role, literally inside the human body. The challenge is not just designer drugs or steroids creating bigger, stronger bodies; the future may lead to other innovations that seem to belong in a science fiction film. Marjoribanks and Farquharson explain, “Such technologies may contribute not only to physical performance, but to the thinking and decision-making capacity of athletes.”⁷

If the challenges the sports world has faced regarding steroids, human growth hormones, and other performance-enhancing drugs is any indication of how governing organizations will handle future cyborg athletes, then the potential implications are far-reaching and fundamental. The sports world will not be able to rely on the personal ethics of individual performers, particularly considering the way athletes have turned to drugs to gain an edge.

CRAFTING A PEOPLE

Although we use the term “sports” loosely today to describe just about any kind of leisure activity or organized game, that notion did not really exist prior to the late 1800s. From precolonial times to the late nineteenth

century, sports slowly grew in importance, but did not yet take hold of the national consciousness as it would in the twentieth century.

If the early settlers in North America had looked carefully, they could have caught a glimpse of the sporting future by examining the Native Americans, who developed sporting events with intricate and ornate rules, customs, and rituals. Historian Elliott J. Gorn explains that Native Americans “often played stickball and other games within a context of sacred dancing, chanting, and drumming, shamanism, dietary restrictions, body painting, pipe smoking, and other ritual practices, all part of a distinct religious worldview.”⁸ The colonists, however, did not take up Native American sports, choosing—when they did play—to engage in games from their homeland or adapting them to their new environment.

From today’s vantage point, the corollary experiences and importance the Native Americans placed on their games seem similar to the modern pomp and circumstance surrounding sports. Even the religious aspect is carried over and considered a central tenet of many sporting events, from the blessing that is broadcast at the beginning of every NASCAR event to the prayer circles players form after professional football games.

Across centuries, then, sports can be viewed as a means for establishing culture, whether in local communities or larger scale efforts at nation building. As sports took a dominant role in American culture, its tenets melded with the ideals at the heart of a capitalistic, democratic society. “Not surprisingly,” says Richard O. Davies, “within a society in which competition provided the essential framework for an aggressive capitalist economy, winning in sports usually took precedence over merely competing and learning to be ‘good losers’.”⁹

Certainly capitalism is at the heart of American history and culture, which is then replicated in the sports world. Much of the language of sports is tied to capitalism and economics, from the salaries of players and revenues of owners to discussions of player “value” for an organization. Many professional athletes earn extraordinary salaries and benefits from their abilities, but in the broader capitalist scheme, they are reduced to mere commodities, just like the majority of fans who watch them. The kinship, then, that people feel for their sports heroes is based to some degree on the recognition that we are all servants to the system, or in sports/popular culture lingo, “the man.”

Sports history is also filled with triumphs and tragedies that shine a spotlight on America’s challenges regarding gender, race, disability, and sexuality. The essays in *American History through American Sports* not

only illuminate specific sports and key individuals that contributed to the establishment of sports in the nation, but also analyze the ways sport has defined and continues to redefine American culture.

AMERICAN HISTORY THROUGH AMERICAN SPORTS INSIDER'S GUIDE

American History through American Sports examines the development of popular sports and sports figures in America, from its earliest origins to the digital age. The essays investigate the development of sports over time, focusing on the core issues in the evolution of sports, as well as the way culture and sports have come together to change public tastes.

This collection blends historical and popular culture perspectives in its analysis of the development of sports and sports figures throughout American history. The set is divided into three volumes, organized chronologically:

- Volume 1 focuses on the early development of sports culture.
- Volume 2 surveys sports in the television age as it became part of mainstream culture.
- Volume 3 examines sports in the digital age.

Each volume begins with a general discussion of the role of sports in American culture. These “big picture” essays address the foundational/critical questions related to the history of sports. Next the volumes look at the “Big Four” sports: baseball, football, basketball, and hockey. Then each volume concludes with a look at sports outside these mainstays, from soccer and boxing to NASCAR and extreme sports.

The wide-ranging essays cover topics of interest for sports fans who enjoy the NFL and MLB, as well as those who like tennis and watching the Olympics. In addition, many essays feature research on and analysis of specific sports icons and favorite heroes. The provocative questions asked include the following:

- Why did it take so long for soccer to take hold in the United States?
- Who is the NFL's all-time greatest running back?
- Why are Americans fascinated with mixed martial arts, extreme sports, and NASCAR?
- Why are race, gender, sexuality, and other societal challenges magnified in the sports world?

NOTES

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