



Sports in American Life

A History

Second Edition

Richard O. Davies

SPORTS IN AMERICAN LIFE

A HISTORY

SECOND EDITION

Richard O. Davies



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SPORTS IN AMERICAN LIFE

Cover illustration:

Defending champion Muhammad Ali glares at a fallen Sonny Liston midway through the first round of their second bout held in Lewiston, Maine, on May 25, 1965. Ali himself was uncertain whether he had hit Liston with a “right cross or a left hook,” and Liston said that Ali caught him with a “sharp punch” that he did not see coming. Many skeptics contended Liston took a dive; most spectators at ringside and those watching on television never saw the punch. Compounding the confusion, referee Jersey Joe Wolcott failed to start a count, but then declared Ali the winner by knockout only after the two fighters had resumed throwing punches 17 seconds after the “phantom punch” had sent Liston to the canvas. Announcer Howard Cosell told a national television audience that “bedlam, chaos and confusion” surrounded this surreal ending to the title bout. This photograph was taken by Associated Press photographer John Rooney.

For Jayme, Mackenzie, and Katie

Preface

During the early years of the nineteenth century, the word “sport” carried a much different connotation than it does today. To be a sporting man in the mid nineteenth century was to be someone who flouted the rules of social acceptability by gravitating toward activities deemed inappropriate for a proper gentleman. The term “sport” was, in fact, used to identify men who embraced the bachelor culture of the tavern, where amid a haze of cigar smoke and the odor of stale beer and cheap whiskey, they watched cockfights and dogfights, bet on an upcoming horse race or baseball match, and won or lost money on the toss of the dice or the turn of a card. Upon special occasions they might even watch pugilists bloody each other in a bare-knuckle prizefight.

There also emerged during the same time period a group of men referred to as sportsmen. These were men of good social standing who found outlets from their pressing business and professional lives as participants and spectators in such activities as sailing, swimming, horse racing, foot racing, rowing, and baseball. By century’s end they likely had also gravitated toward popular new activities such as tennis, bicycle racing, football, golf, basketball, and volleyball. As these sports grew in popularity, sportsmen (now joined by a small but growing number of sportswomen) mimicked trends within the professional and business worlds by striving to achieve order and stability. They established amateur and professional leagues and associations, published statistics, developed and marketed specialized equipment, and enforced written rules governing athletic competition.

Although sports and games revealed a distinctly provincial quality in 1800, by the beginning of the twentieth century spontaneity and informality had been replaced by formalized structures, written rules, and bureaucratic organization. Befitting the growing specialization within the emerging national marketplace, a small number of skilled athletes were even able to work at play, earning their living as professional athletes. Several of the new sports provided women opportunities to participate, although under carefully guarded conditions. In this rapidly changing environment, the word “sport” lost much of its negative connotation. Now, to be a sporting man or woman was to be involved in a robust new American lifestyle. By the early twentieth century, organized sports had assumed a

prominent place in American life, reflective of the exuberant capitalistic and democratic spirit of a rapidly maturing society.

This book traces the evolution of American sports, from its unorganized and quaint origins to the present time. The narrative is organized around the argument that sports, for good or for ill, have been a significant, if often overlooked, social force throughout the history of the United States. In recent years, historians have come to recognize that throughout the history of mankind, games have revealed many of the underlying values of society. Rather than being irrelevant diversions of little consequence, such activities provide important insights into fundamental values and beliefs. The games people played may have provided a convenient means of releasing tension or a means of escaping the realities of the day, but they also provided rituals that linked generations and united communities.

The essential assumption of this book is that throughout American history the form and purpose of sporting events have been closely connected to the larger society from which they arose. As but one recent example: during the days immediately following the terrorist attack upon the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, on September 11, 2001, Americans found reassurance in expressing their national unity and resolve through highly symbolic patriotic exercises conducted prior to the start of baseball and football games. National leaders urged the resumption of sports schedules as soon as it became apparent that no more attacks were imminent, viewing the playing of games as an emphatic statement of national resolve that the terrorists would not disturb the rhythms of everyday life.

Sports in American Culture

Organized sports in the nineteenth century grew naturally with the new systems of transportation, manufacturing, and commercial organization. They took hold primarily in the cities that were created by the new modern America, and during the twentieth century they grew exponentially, propelled to prominence by the new communications media of radio, motion pictures, newspapers, and television. In contemporary America, sports have become an enormous multibillion-dollar enterprise. Professional football and baseball franchises are valued at between \$400 million and \$1 billion, and nearly every major American city has in recent years spent hundreds of millions of dollars to build sports arenas and stadiums to accommodate professional teams. Most major professional teams operate on annual budgets that exceed \$200 million, and major college athletic programs have annual budgets ranging between \$30 million and \$100 million, with a growing number exceeding that figure. An oft-overlooked ancillary economic activity attests to the importance Americans place upon sporting events: conservative estimates are that gamblers bet at least \$4 billion a year on sporting events, a figure larger than the gross national product of some Third World countries. At least 20 percent of the news reported in any daily urban newspaper is devoted to the activities of a small handful of that city's prominent residents who dribble basketballs, hit baseballs, or knock each other to the ground with intense ferocity. Radio and television networks provide 24 hour coverage of America's sports to a

seemingly insatiable audience. A vast assortment of consumer items – automobiles, clothing, and beverages – are marketed in close relationship with sports teams and athletes.

My first effort to examine the role of sports in American life presented the argument that a broad swath of the American people were obsessed with sports; at the time I thought my interpretation would engender considerable criticism, but instead it resonated with general readers as well as those in academia.¹ In many ways, America's obsession with sports and the men and women who play the games has intersected in unsuspected ways with larger issues of public policy. For example, in many cities students attend public schools in dilapidated buildings with leaking roofs and outmoded classrooms and laboratories, and are taught by underpaid teachers using tattered out-of-date textbooks. City streets go unrepaired, libraries close, and hospitals struggle to deal with their patient loads, but in these same cities, civic leaders eagerly cater to the demands of professional teams. The owners – multimillionaires all – enjoy a special kind of public welfare through their lucrative agreements with local governments. Crucial social services might go untended, but time and again, taxpayers vote in favor of a tax increase to build a new arena or stadium and public officials placate team owners by granting tax breaks, sweetheart deals on rental fees, and control of concessions and parking.

Between 1980 and 2010, nearly every major American city constructed lavish new sports venues for several professional teams, often to the serious neglect of other community needs. Just as the citizenry of medieval European communities revealed their essential values by constructing imposing cathedrals in the town square, so too have modern American cities given expression to their priorities and values by erecting enormous sports facilities.

Sports and American History

The issue of stadium construction and operation is but one example of how sports and larger community issues intersect. The pages that follow examine the role of sports within the broader context of the major themes of American history. This book is an extension of major trends of the last quarter-century that have reshaped the way historians look at the past. The historical profession, which had long focused its attention on political, economic, and diplomatic themes, was fundamentally affected by the social upheavals of the 1960s. As part of the fallout of that turbulent period, the traditional historical approach that focused on the achievements and failures of a white, male political and economic establishment was challenged. A new generation of students, who questioned many of the existing myths about the “establishment,” demanded courses in African American, Hispanic, and Native American history, classes on the history of environmental issues, and fresh perspectives on the American experience written from the vantage point of the poor, women, and the working class.

It was within this period of intellectual ferment that scholars first began a serious examination of the role of sports in American history. The extensive body of literature upon which this book is based reveals that most of the writing on the history of American sports before the mid 1970s was done outside the academy, but since then professional historians have begun to produce books and articles that explore the relationship of American sports

with larger social issues. In 1972, the first professional society in the United States devoted to the field of sports history was established, and several pioneering scholars made laudable efforts to provide a meaningful synthesis.² A few courses on the history of baseball had been taught previously, but in the ensuing decades more inclusive histories of American sports were introduced. Academic publishers began releasing a growing number of scholarly monographs on the subject of sports. History survey textbooks now included pictures of early baseball parks or college football games along with the more conventional images of soldiers, presidents, and reformers. But resistance, or at least persistent apathy, has slowed the integration of sports into broader cultural contexts in the curricula of the humanities and social sciences.

The emergence of sports history as a serious scholarly endeavor is no small achievement, because within any college or university there are faculty members who decry the existence of intercollegiate sports programs. A national survey I conducted in 1999 indicated that the overwhelming number of specialized upper-division and graduate-level American courses in social history still do not include the role of sports, and that history departments remained reluctant to conduct searches for faculty with sports as a focus of their teaching and research.

The rationale for this resistance is not surprising. Many faculty members have rightfully objected to gargantuan athletic department budgets and the simultaneous exploitation and coddling of athletes on their campuses, and have been outraged by the many scandals that have time-and-again besmirched the image of American higher education. Tenured faculty who offer seminars in American social history have built their research programs on other important cultural connections – the arts, labor, motion pictures, literature, immigration, class, gender – and the list goes on. Few graduate programs provide encouragement to graduate students to undertake serious research in sports-related topics, and those that select them are routinely warned that their placement in the academic marketplace could easily be jeopardized. Such was the case of Yale doctoral student Warren Goldstein in the 1970s who opted to present a dissertation on the history of baseball. His “Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball” became a landmark study that opened up scholarly potentials for future scholars. Nonetheless, he reports that his dissertation topic made his search for a tenure-track university position a difficult and prolonged exercise.³

This text will examine many themes, but throughout, the roles of gender and race are pervasive. Writing in 1994, two scholars who have made major contributions to the literature exploring the cultural context of American sports, Elliott J. Gorn and Michael Oriard, called for scholars engaged in sociology, literature, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, and history to explore the many ways their cultural studies intersect with sports: “Where is there a cultural activity more freighted with constructions of masculinity than football, more deeply inscribed with race than boxing, more tied in the public mind to the hopes and hopelessness of inner-city youth than basketball?” Taking note of the heavy emphasis being placed upon multiculturalism in contemporary college curricula, they pointed to the pervasive role of sports in the mass media. “It is almost a cliché,” they wrote, “to mention that sports are the lingua franca of men talking across divisions of class and race. Sports can reveal just how interdependent particular subcultures and the larger consumer culture can be. Think, for example, of the symbiotic ties between inner-city playground basketball and the National Basketball Association.”⁴

On a superficial level, from the colonial period to the present, sporting events have provided a useful diversion from the pressures of daily life. Just as colonists tossed a ball or watched a horse race to enliven their lives, so too do contemporary Americans follow the ups and downs of their favorite teams, put \$10 in the office pool on the NCAA basketball tournament, and play on their church's co-ed slow-pitch softball team. On a more serious level, parents, religious leaders, educators, and moral reformers have used sports to teach new generations the values of fair play, honesty, perseverance, and cooperation. Presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama have interjected themselves into the public debate over pressing sports issues. President George W. Bush was part owner and managing partner of a major-league baseball team, the Texas Rangers, before his election as governor of Texas in 1994. Sporting venues have often provided a stage on which Americans have dealt with the paramount issues of race and sexual discrimination. Students can learn much about the nature of American race relations by examining the Negro Baseball Leagues, the "fight of the century" between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries, the triumphs and tragedies of track star Jessie Owens, or the courage and resolution of Jackie Robinson in challenging the unwritten exclusionary racial covenant of organized baseball. Students interested in the dynamics of the women's rights movement can similarly draw insights from the struggles against entrenched sexism in both amateur and professional sports by such gifted athletes as Gertrude Ederle, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, Wilma Rudolph, and Billie Jean King. Political battles over the development of athletic programs for schoolgirls and college women during the past four decades have been, and remain, an integral part of a much larger national struggle against gender discrimination.

For the purpose of this book, the word "sport" entails an organized competitive activity between participants that requires some combination of skill and physical prowess. Thus, such games as baseball, volleyball, and tennis are considered sports; chess, backgammon, and bridge are not. Some competitive games played primarily for pleasure or exercise, such as croquet, badminton, jogging, aerobics, and racquetball, are likewise excluded from this definition, but stock car and marathon races fit comfortably within it. Professional wrestling, despite its popularity, is excluded because it is a loosely scripted entertainment spectacle rather than a competitive contest. Similarly, junk sports such as roller derby and motocross are excluded, along with choreographed performance spectacles such as water ballet, figure skating, and ice dancing. In recent years, new sports have emerged out of what were originally recreational pursuits: snowboarding, skateboarding, and mixed martial arts. Although hunters and fishermen refer to themselves as "sportsmen" and while professional fishermen sometimes engage in tournaments, those activities are considered here to be of a recreational nature.

This is an examination of the world of sports as it intersects with the larger themes and issues of American life. American sports, at their best, have provided us with inspiring stories of courage, grace, drama, excitement, and accomplishment. Conversely, they have also brought out, for all to see, depressing examples of brutality, cruelty, racism, sexism, stupidity, intolerance, homophobia, xenophobia, nationalism, greed, and hypocrisy. Both extremes are on display in the pages that follow. In many respects, these pages present my personal take on the role of sports in American history, a culmination of a lifetime spent as a participant in and close observer of the American sports scene, and, for the past 20 years,

as a professor exploring the fascinating saga of sports in the American experience as a researcher and classroom instructor.

For better or for worse, sports have played an integral part in the history of the United States, providing Americans with a venue in which major cultural and social issues have been debated, contested, and, in some notable instances, resolved. In a sense, this book seeks to examine the American past through the prism of sports. It is not simply a story of the winners and losers, nor is it a chronicle of the individual achievements of athletes. This is a book intended for the serious student interested in examining the American past from the perspective of sports.

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Acknowledgments

No book of this magnitude can be brought to publication without the assistance of many individuals. This second edition has sought to sharpen the focus of the original text and incorporate important developments that have occurred in the past five years. Ever since I began work on the first edition I have benefited from the encouragement and guidance of Wiley-Blackwell Senior Editor Peter Coveney. His enthusiastic support for the project, coupled with his guidance and good humor, made the effort rewarding. The details of editing and production have been overseen with efficiency and understanding by Editorial Assistant Galen Smith. I gratefully acknowledge her assistance throughout the process.

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Throughout my career Sharon has been unfailingly supportive of my various academic roles as teacher, researcher, and administrator. Undertaking to write a book as broad and complex as this entails a multiyear commitment. This book is dedicated to our three granddaughters who have enriched our lives. It is our hope that their futures are filled with the joys provided by playing the games they enjoy and supporting the teams and athletes they respect.

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