ATHLETICS, SOCIETY, AND HISTORY: AN UNDERGRADUATE COURSE IN THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN SPORT

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Over the past generation, the dictum that Clio is more than past politics has given rise to a new social history that concerns itself with the lives of ordinary people. The new social history has prompted research and the creation of courses examining family, gender, race, ethnicity, work, and even recreation. Nevertheless, many academics remain skeptical about the legitimacy of courses in sport history.

Since 1982 I have taught "Athletics, Society, and History," an undergraduate American history course, at the State University of New York at Oneonta. By providing an intellectual rationale and practical "how-to" information, based on my own experience, I hope to encourage others to develop courses in sport history. To gain support from departmental colleagues and administrators, many of whom may initially regard athletic studies as facile, a proposal for a course in American sport history needs to provide considerable information about goals, content, and resources.

Before presenting a course proposal, it is, obviously, necessary to familiarize one's self with the subject matter. Membership in the North American Society for Sport History will facilitate this process. The society publishes the *Journal of Sport History*, which features scholarly articles, book reviews, and surveys of articles that appear in other journals, and distributes a directory listing the institutional affiliations, addresses, research interests, and course offerings of its members. This directory provides the prospective teacher of a sport history course with the opportunity to exchange ideas and syllabi with other academics. Furthermore, the selected bibliography of sport history books that follows this article provides resources for instructor presentations and student assignments.

After networking and reading, the instructor will be ready to prepare a formal course proposal. Noting that sport history courses are no longer a rarity, the proposal might list Colorado State University, Lamar University, Michigan State University, New York University, North Carolina State University, Northeastern Illinois University, University of Nebraska, University of Tennessee, University of Utah, University of Wisconsin, William Penn College, and other institutions with such offerings. Mention could also be made that Oxford University Press, The Johns Hopkins University Press, University of Illinois Press, Columbia University Press, The University of Wisconsin Press, Northeastern University Press, and The Pennsylvania State University Press are among the academic publishers of sport history monographs.

A proposal for a sport history course must provide a rationale for the subject's inclusion in the liberal arts curriculum. Since many students have an interest in athletics, sport can be used as a vehicle to stimulate their intellectual curiosity in United States history. Another justification for a sport history course is that any endeavor in which large numbers of people participate over a long period of time merits study. A more important reason for teaching sport history, however, is that it provides a revealing mirror to the American past. As historian Christopher Lasch

Teaching History 20(1). DOI: 10.33043/TH.20.1.20-28.

notes, "Games derive their power from the investment of seemingly trivial activity with serious intent."[1] The symbolism attached to sport renders it a microcosm of American society. The proper focus of a sport history course is this symbiotic relationship between sport and the larger culture, not the parochial aspects of particular games. College football, for example, emerged at Ivy League institutions in the late nineteenth century as the Anglo-American elite sought, by means of a moral equivalent of war, to perpetuate the dominance of their social class in American life. Likewise, the ballyhoo and boosterism that surrounded the bouts of boxing champion Jack Dempsey illuminate the business culture of the 1920s.

There is much truth to the scholar Jacques Barzun's observation about the national pastime: "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball, the rules and realities of the game."[2] Indeed, widespread acceptance of the myth that baseball was invented in Cooperstown by Abner Doubleday, despite the game's evolution from English antecedents, parallels the belief in American exceptionalism. The Doubleday myth and historian Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, which views the American environment, rather than immigrant cultures, as central to national character, appeal to the same indigenous values. Baseball also reflects prevailing racial practices. For example, a number of African-Americans played on integrated teams during the late nineteenth century, but the nearly half-century of segregation in organized baseball coincided with the Supreme Court's condoning of separatism in the 1890s. Moreover, the 1946 reintegration of baseball followed a war in which Americans defined themselves by their opposition to Nazi racism. Sport history provides a vantage point for examining patterns of persistence and change in American ethnic and racial relations, gender roles, demography, economics, technology, and values.

Anticipate enrollment as a problem for your sport history course, not too few student but too many and the wrong sort. Despite those who plead for admittance on an overflow basis, I have learned to cap course enrollments at fifty. Undoubtedly some students will sign up anticipating little work, easy grades, and "bull sessions" about yesterday's big game. During the first class, I emphasize that this is a serious and demanding course, and that those who thought otherwise are well advised to drop it or to readjust their expectations. Students are informed that the course is not about sports trivia, esoteric statistics, or ephemeral current events. Instead, I stress that this course utilizes sport to analyze significant phenomena in American history.

Students encounter a syllabus that requires substantial reading. Benjamin Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sport*, Second Edition (Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990) is the major text. Examining recreation from the local pastimes of the colonial era to the media spectacles of today, Rader places sport within the context of American social and cultural evolution. Engaging,

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[1] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 109.

[2] Quoted in David Quentin Voigt, *American Baseball—Volume II: From the Commissioners to Continental Expansion*, 2d ed. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), 240.

informative, and insightful, Rader's *American Sports* is currently the best survey of the subject. I also assign three to four other books per semester on more specialized aspects of sport history. Supplementary readings vary from semester to semester, and the selected bibliography at the conclusion of this article identifies various options. Among the supplementary readings that have promoted informed and animated discussions are the following. Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983) examines the reign of boxing's first black heavyweight champion (1908-1915) and the fears he aroused amongst white Americans. Larry Englemann, *The Goddess and the American Girl: The Story of Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) offers insight into tennis, celebrity, and gender during the 1920s. Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (New York: Macmillan, 1971) illuminates the political and ideological implications of the United States participating in the 1936 Berlin games, hosted by Adolf Hitler. An analysis of the desegregation of American sport and society comprises Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). Charles Rosen, *The Scandals of 1951: How the Gamblers Almost Killed College Basketball* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978) leads students to debate strategies for terminating the correlation between universities, amateurism, big money, and corruption.

In terms of structure and material covered, courses in sport history may differ. Nonetheless, a description of the approach that I employ provides prospective teachers of sport history with a prototype that they can adapt to their needs. Given the growing prominence of American sport over time, my course gives greater emphasis to post-1850 phenomena. However, significant attention is given to earlier periods. Utilizing a conceptual structure that is both chronological and topical, the course is organized around eight major components: 1. Definitions and Perspectives; 2. Antecedents; 3. Native American Customs; 4. Recreation in Colonial America; 5. Pastimes in a Developing Nation; 6. The Emergence of Modern American Sport; 7. Sport as Mass Culture; and 8. Sport and the Transformation of American Society. Descriptions of these eight components follow.

1. Definitions and Perspectives. The course commences with an attempt to define sports. Students are given the opportunity to offer their own definition of sport and to discuss the ideas presented in Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978). Are all games, including leapfrog and ring-around-the-rosie, sports? Are all contests, including legal proceedings and wars, sports? Is Guttmann's own definition of sport "as nonutilitarian contests which include an important measure of physical as well as intellectual skill" persuasive?[3]

In this initial unit, students are also introduced to, and encouraged to debate, various frames of reference scholars apply to sport, including Marxist, neo-Marxist, Freudian, Weberian, structural-functional, and "theology of play" perspectives. Guttmann's thesis that seven characteristics—secularism, equality, specialization,

[3] Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 1-14.

rationalization, bureaucracy, quantification, and records—distinguish modern sport from athletics in earlier eras is presented and discussed.[4]

2. Antecedents. Although this is an American history course, some attention is paid to sport in past societies. Given that semester-length courses exist that examine sport from a global perspective or on the experiences of a single nation other than the United States, I caution students that this section is eclectic. Still, a unit on antecedents to American sport sensitizes the class to a multicultural perspective. Similarities and differences between the sports of the Greeks and Romans of antiquity are examined. Consideration is given to the distinction between the sports of the nobility and the lower classes in Medieval Europe. Students also examine humanism's glorification of physical activity, the courtly tradition, the Haxey Hook contest and other folk games, Puritanism's distrust of sport, the impact of the Restoration, and the emergence of modern sport in England.

3. Native American Customs. Next, the course surveys the indigenous games of the American Indian. Attention is given to various Indian groups. Distinctions between games of chance and dexterity are noted. Long distance running, field hockey, and lacrosse are among the pastimes examined. Students learn that, as with Greek contests, Native American sports and games often served as religious rituals.

4. Recreation in Colonial America. This unit focuses on the colonial period that began with the settlement of Jamestown in 1607 and ended with the American Revolution in 1775. Students learn that the imperatives of labor and the Protestant ethic limited leisure in this pre-industrial, agricultural society. Yet, pastimes existed, ranging from the elite sports of horse racing and fox hunting to the tavern amusements of the common people, such as skittles and animal baiting. Regional variations between New England, Middle, and Southern colonies are examined as are distinctions based on class, ethnicity, and race. Students also discuss the impact of the frontier, Old World Customs, religion, and work on colonial recreation.

5. Pastimes in a Developing Nation. Attention then shifts to the period that began with the formation of the United States in 1776 and ended with efforts to preserve it in 1850. The United States's establishment of the institutions of government, assertion of cultural independence, transportation revolution, population growth, territorial acquisition, technological innovation, and sectional diversity were reflected in the microcosm of the nation's games and sports. Illustrating the uneven pace of change in a heterogeneous nation, folk games and rough sport endured in frontier regions, while pastimes in more developed areas were increasingly shaped by written rules and formal organizations. Likewise, North-South horse races demonstrated regional loyalties. Students assess the influence of slavery, industrialization, urban commercialism, Victorianism, the Cult of True Womanhood, working-class counterculture, ethnicity, romanticism, and reform on the pastimes of a developing nation. The Caledonian Games, billiards, prize fighting, yachting, horse racing, ball games, and pedestrianism are among the sporting phenomena discussed.

6. The Emergence of Modern American Sport. In this unit, the course focuses on the emergence of modern sport between 1851 and 1900. Born in England, modern

[4] Guttmann, 15-89.

sport, unlike folk games, has standardized rules, regulatory organizations, support personnel, training regimens, quantification of results, and constituencies not circumscribed by localism. The formation of the National League of Professional Base Ball Clubs, the Amateur Athletic Union, the Intercollegiate Football Association, the Rowing Association of American Colleges, the League of American Wheelman, and other institutions created a sports bureaucracy in the United States. Contemporaneously, improvements in manufacturing increased the quality, uniformity, and accessibility of athletic equipment, and more reliable transportation encouraged the movement of participants and spectators.

Students use sports to analyze the Horatio Alger ethos, Social Darwinism, urban growth, technological advances, economic concentration, immigration, labor strife, racism, and other aspects of the late nineteenth-century zeitgeist. The ruthless tactics employed by established baseball owners against the pro-labor Players' League in 1890, for example, are compared to those used by entrepreneurs in other industries of the era against workers' organizations. Students also discuss the theory that in a rapidly changing nation, Americans elevated baseball to the status of national pastime, in part, for its capacity to evoke the rural nostalgia of a simpler time. The origins of intercollegiate sport, the birth of the modern Olympics, the invention of basketball, the bicycling boom, the adoption of the Marquis of Queensbury rules in boxing, the debate over amateurism, and muscular Christianity also receive attention.

7. Sport as Mass Culture. This section examines the relationship between sport and the mass culture that arose between 1901 and 1945. During these years, family-oriented magazines, newspaper chains, new advertising techniques, movies, and radio facilitated the growth of a national popular culture. The media diminished the importance of regionalism, encouraging greater homogeneity in the dissemination of information and perceptions. As a significant component of the entertainment industry, sport was a staple of the new mass media.

This unit raises questions about what a people's choice of heroes reveals about their values. Students consider whether Americans of this period, dwarfed by cities and bureaucracies, sought through compensatory heroes to affirm their own importance. Moreover, why did sport provide the nation with many of its heroes? By analyzing allegations concerning Joe Jackson's participation in the "fixing" of the 1919 World Series, for example, students gain insight into the corruption that followed World War I. And they debate whether baseball slugger Babe Ruth, given his nocturnal appetites, would have acquired the status of folk hero in a less hedonistic era.

Attention is also given to the transformation of boxing champion Joe Louis and Olympian Jesse Owens into allegorical symbols of democracy triumphant over Nazi Germany at a time when they and other African-Americans encountered pervasive racism in the United States. Among other topics examined in this section are Jack Johnson's impact on race relations, baseball's Negro leagues, the playground movement, the establishment of public school sports programs, military athletic programs, the birth of professional football, the policies of the Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation, Babe Didrikson Zaharias and public perceptions of female athletes, the All-American Girls' Baseball League, ethnic standard bearers, the class implications of country club sports, the expansion of college sports, and Olympic politics.

8. Sport and the Transformation of American Society. Surveying the years from 1946 to the present, the course concludes with an analysis of the phenomena that transformed post-war American society and sport. From the vantage point of sport, students study the Cold War, urban decay and the growth of suburbia, technological innovation, neo-Victorianism and the feminist reaction against it, the Civil Rights movement, the influence of the electronic media, intergenerational conflict, and economic change. Examination of the Olympic Games, for example, illuminates the ideological rivalry between the United States and the former Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the propaganda of both nations portrayed their victories in international athletic competition as evidence of the superiority of their respective economic systems. Conversely, "ping pong diplomacy" contributed to better relations between the United States and China.

In addition, this section provides students with important insights about race relations in post-war America. Comparisons are drawn between the goals, tactics, and impact of proponents of sport integration and those who confronted racism in other areas of American life. How were the roles of baseball's Jackie Robinson, basketball's Chuck Cooper, football's Kenny Washington, and tennis's Althea Gibson similar or different to that of Montgomery's Rosa Parks? Was the racial integration of sport symbolic or substantive? Did athletics merely reflect or did it cause change in the larger society? Students also debate the effectiveness of protests against racism in sport and society made by Paul Robeson, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Muhammed Ali, Harry Edwards, Arthur Ashe, and other African-Americans.

Additional topics covered in the final unit include the women's movement in sport, the fitness boom, the democratization of tennis and golf, youth sport, the ubiquity of television, substance abuse, gambling scandals, the proliferation and movement of franchises, the demise of the reserve clause, and the economics of the sports industry. Although current events are not ignored in this section, they are discussed selectively to provide a catalyst for generalizing about the long-term forces of history that shaped the present. The course concludes with student hypotheses about the future of American sport.

My sport history course is the beneficiary of certain fortuitous circumstances. Oneonta, where I teach, is home to the Soccer Hall of Fame museum and archives, and the Baseball Hall of Fame and the National Baseball Library are located in nearby Cooperstown. The Oneonta Yankees, a minor league baseball team, grace our area. Furthermore, since 1989 my college has sponsored an annual scholarly conference on "Baseball and the American Culture."[5] These institutions provide my sport history course with resources for field trips, guest speakers, audio-visual materials, research, and networking.

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[5] At the 1993 edition of this symposium on "Baseball and the American Culture," I had the privilege of serving as panel commentator for outstanding presentations on the teaching of baseball studies by Professors Thomas Altherr (Metropolitan State College of Denver), Ted Hovet (Duke University), and Scott McEathron (Southern Illinois University). Our discussions prompted me to write about my own course in sport history. Given that their focus is baseball while mine is sport, our methodologies and content differ. I wish, however, to gratefully acknowledge that their insights helped me to think more clearly about my own work.

Even if an instructor's college is not in easy proximity to a sports museum-library, professional team, or symposium on athletics, there are opportunities to utilize local resources. The sports programs of one's own college and community organizations, such as public schools, playground associations. YMCAs, Boys' Clubs, and country clubs, should generate ideas for field trips, guest speakers, and research. Likewise, if current or former professional athletes reside in the area, they might be persuaded to participate in an oral history project. Upon investigation, one may find that the local historical society possesses archival material germane to the community's sporting past. Back issues of campus and community newspapers may also offer data for student research. As for audio-visual materials, film reviews in the *Journal of Sport History* provide a guide to the purchase or rental of appropriate videotapes.

I have derived much satisfaction from the teaching sport history. It has made me a better historian, more attuned to nuance. Sport history has also honed my ability to identify and analyze connections between past phenomena. More importantly, despite the persistence of some undergraduates who initially envision a "gut" course for "jocks," sport history effectively promotes student learning. Attendance is high. Course evaluations suggest that students are conscientious about their assignments, and this is reflected in class discussions, essay exams, multiple choice tests, and research papers. In their evaluations of sport history, students consistently give the course high ratings as a learning experience. A number of students who indicate that this is their first history course go on to take additional courses in our department, and more than a few have subsequently become history majors. Student comments about sport history are typically enthusiastic, but the most significant appraisal simply stated, "This course gave me a better understanding of American history."

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