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A COMPANION TO
AMERICAN SPORT
HISTORY

EDITED BY
Steven A. Riess

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A Companion to American Sport History

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Steven A. Riess

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Contents

Notes on Contributors	viii
Introduction <i>Steven A. Riess</i>	1
Part I Major Chronological Eras of Sport History	11
1 The Emergence of Sport: A Historiographical Appraisal of Sport in America through 1865 <i>James C. Schneider</i>	13
2 The Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, 1865–1920 <i>Gerald R. Gems</i>	32
3 The Interwar and Post-World War II Eras, 1920–1960 <i>Ryan Swanson</i>	60
4 Sport Since the 1960s <i>Russ Crawford</i>	84
Part II Historical Processes and Sport	107
5 Scientific Habits of Mind, Technological Revolutions, and American Sport <i>Mark Dyreson</i>	109
6 Urbanization and American Sport <i>Joseph C. Bigott</i>	130
Part III Major Team Sports	153
7 Baseball Before 1920 <i>Leslie Heaphy</i>	155

8	Baseball Since 1920 <i>Rebecca T. Alpert</i>	177
9	Reconciling the Consequences of Modernity: College Football as Cultural History <i>Kurt Edward Kemper</i>	202
10	Professional Football <i>Anthony Santoro</i>	221
11	Basketball <i>Aram Goudsouzian</i>	246
	Part IV Major Individual Sports	269
12	Boxing: The Manly Art <i>Randy Roberts and Andrew R. M. Smith</i>	271
13	Golf and Tennis <i>Robert Pruter</i>	292
14	American Motor Sport: The Checkered Literature on the Checkered Flag <i>David N. Lucsko</i>	313
15	Historians, Track Stars, and Amateurism: Retrospect and Prospects <i>Alan S. Katchen</i>	334
	Part V Sport, Government, and the Global Society	357
16	The United States and International Sport: A Historiography <i>Nicholas Evan Sarantakes</i>	359
17	The United States in the Modern Olympic Movement: A Historiography <i>Robert K. Barney</i>	379
	Part VI Sport and Social History	403
18	Historians Take on Ethnicity, Race, and Sport <i>Gerald R. Gems</i>	405
19	The African American Athlete <i>Louis Moore</i>	434
20	Class and Sport <i>Steven A. Riess</i>	454
21	Manhood or Masculinity: The Historiography of Manliness in American Sport <i>Brian M. Ingrassia</i>	479
22	Women in American Sport History <i>Linda J. Borish</i>	500

Part VII Sport and Capitalism	521
23 Explaining Exceptionalism: Approaches to the Study of American Sports Business History <i>J. Andrew Ross</i>	523
24 Sport and the Media <i>James R. Walker and Robert V. Bellamy, Jr</i>	552
25 Stadiums, Arenas, and Audiences <i>Robert C. Trumbour</i>	577
Part VIII Sport and Culture	599
26 Sport and American Religion <i>Richard Kimball</i>	601
27 Not Always “Natural”: A Historiography of Sport in American Culture <i>Kevin B. Witherspoon</i>	615
28 Sports Biographies <i>Maureen Smith</i>	634
Index	656

Notes on Contributors

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Robert Pruter had been the government document librarian at Lewis University, Romeoville, Illinois since 2001. His first love was music history, and he authored the prize-winning *Chicago Soul* (1991) and *Doowop: The Chicago Scene* (1996), and edited the *Blackwell Guide to Soul Recordings* (1993). Thereafter he turned to the study of sport history. His most recent book is *The Rise of American High School Sports and the Search for Control, 1880–1930* (2013).

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Andrew R. M. Smith teaches US history at Purdue University and Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis. His essays on boxing history have appeared in the *African American National Biography*, *Sports in America from Colonial Times to the Twenty-First Century: An Encyclopedia*, the *Journal of Sport History*,

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INTRODUCTION

Steven A. Riess

The purpose of this book is to introduce general readers and academics to, and expand the familiarity of experts with, the rich field of American sport history which is one of the newest subfields in history. Scholars use the term “sport” to refer to the all-encompassing set of institutions and cultural practices of the athletic world, and “sports” when discussing particular rule-bound competitive contests that employ skill, dexterity, eye–hand coordination, strength, and/or fitness, like football, baseball, or darts. While books have been written about the subject of American sport history for over 100 years, nearly all the books were until recently written by sportswriters and other authors whose audience was almost exclusively sports fans. These books were typically narrative team histories and biographies based on limited research and little investigation of primary sources, and were undocumented and extremely uncritical. They were intended to be fun to read (not that there is anything wrong with that), but largely antiquarian and without analytic or any other purpose.

The subject of sport was long overlooked by historians who considered this institution, despite its historic significance, to be beneath them, as a topic sufficiently understood by fans from 8 to 88. History was a topic of greater seriousness that dealt with matters like statecraft, international relations, technological innovation, business, and warfare. Serious studies of sport were few and far between, beginning with Frederick Jackson Turner’s student Frederic L. Paxson’s “The Rise of Sport,” published in 1917 in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (*MVHR*). Paxson argued that the rise of sport in the late nineteenth century was a response to the rise of cities, where Americans were deprived of a rigorous rural and frontier life. He asserted that, with the loss of the frontier, urban Americans needed a safety valve to help them cope.

John Allen Krout wrote the first academic survey of American sport history, entitled *Annals of American Sport* (1929), a highly illustrated volume in Yale University Press’s renowned Pageant of America series. Then in 1931 Jennie Holliman’s *American Sports (1785–1835)* was published, which sought to reveal the American people by

examining their leisure activities. Holliman analyzed the origins of rural American sports, such as field sports and contests of skill and strength, and considered their significance before sports became organized.

Paxson's deprivation thesis influenced Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr's influential *The Rise of the City, 1878–1898* (1933), which attributed the athletic boom to a reaction against restrictive urban life. Spectator sports provided them with a means to vicariously enjoy the pleasures and healthful benefits of rural life. The deprivation model was reinforced by Foster Rhea Dulles's *America Learns to Play: A History of Popular Recreation, 1607–1940* (1940), based on his Columbia University PhD dissertation supervised by John Krout. Dulles noted that crowded urban conditions and the pace of industrial work made traditional village pleasures impractical, which drew city folk to escapist spectatorial entertainments as outlets for their "surplus energy and suppressed emotions" (1940: 198).

The first specialist in American sport history was John R. Betts of Boston College, who, in his PhD dissertation, "The Rise of Organized Sport in America" (1951), did not consider sport to be either a reaction against the negative features of industrial labor or a romantic return to a lost pristine age. Betts's novel thesis was that sport boomed after the Civil War and was mainly a positive product of urban industrialization, a remedy for, rather than a response to, its negative features. Prior to his death and the posthumous publication of his book *America's Sporting Heritage, 1850–1950* (1974), he wrote several highly influential essays that appeared in scholarly periodicals like the *Journal of American History* (1953a, 1968) and *American Quarterly* (1953b). In these he asserted that an affirmative sports creed emerged in the antebellum era which justified sport as a positive good for the middle class and led to a boom in sport after the Civil War. The middle class took advantage of technological innovations that led to cheap, mass-produced sporting goods, the expansion of industrial capitalism, which raised their standard of living, and revolutions in transportation and communication that made competitive sports more accessible and widely known.

In the 1960s and 1970s sport remained a very minor topic in American historiography. A breakthrough came with the study of baseball by Harold Seymour, who completed his doctoral dissertation at Cornell University in 1956. He examined the rise of nineteenth-century baseball from a simple boy's game into the national pastime, focusing on the commercialization and professionalization of the game. A revised version of this was published four years later as *Baseball: The Early Years* (1960) by Oxford University Press. The book contextualized baseball's development within the growth of industrial capitalism. A 1962 dissertation on a similar topic by David Voigt at Syracuse University was published as the first volume of *American Baseball*, entitled *From Gentlemen's Sport to the Commissioner System* (1966). Seymour followed up with a definitive second volume entitled *The Golden Age* (1971), which covered the period 1900–1930, when the sport became a profitable monopsony under the control of Major League Baseball, and Voigt produced *From the Commissioners to Continental Expansion* (1970), which brought his narrative up to the 1960s. Voigt's third volume, *From Postwar Expansion to the Electronic Age* (1983) brought the narrative up to the early 1980s. Seymour's third volume, *The People's Game* (1989), did not, as expected continue his narrative history of major league baseball. Instead he studied the sport outside organized baseball from the late nineteenth century through World War II. This far-ranging volume scrutinized all aspects of amateur baseball on sandlots, colleges, and prisons, the participation of women and Native Americans in the national pastime, and the history of professional black baseball. His widow, Dorothy Seymour

Mills later revealed that she had been the uncredited co-author of the series, and in 2011 Oxford University Press recognized her as the co-author (Mills 2004; SABR 2011). The Seymours' beautifully written, painstakingly researched trilogy (albeit with no endnotes because of the publisher's decision) set a high standard for future research in sport history, which was still primarily focused on baseball.

Despite these early scholarly works, historians in the 1960s and early 1970s perceived writing about sport to be a killer for an academic career. Seymour had a brief career as a college professor and Voigt was employed in a department of sociology. Marshall Smelser, a renowned historian of the early nation at the University of Notre Dame, wanted to write baseball history, but worried about its impact on his career because his colleagues considered sport a frivolous topic. It was only in 1975, at the end of his career, that Smelser wrote his biography of Babe Ruth, *The Life that Ruth Built*.

The new scholarship on baseball resonated with younger scholars in the late 1960s and early 1970s who were influenced by important changes in higher education as, under the influence of the student revolt, the civil rights movement, and feminism, it became more open to questioning established standards. In the more democratic campus atmosphere, students demanded a more relevant curriculum, and faculties became more egalitarian. The interest in the history of the common man/woman led to the rise of social history as a major discipline, and the growing importance of interdisciplinary approaches, especially the concepts of cultural anthropologists, to the study of history. Historians in the early 1970s recognized that the analysis of mass institutions and how mass culture interacts with the broader society illuminate major core issues of American history, particularly topics focusing on class, ethnicity, race, and gender.

The study of sport began to gain intellectual acceptance in the 1970s with the rise of the North American Society for Sport History (1972), and the publication of its *Journal of Sport History*, yet the only teaching positions in sport history were in departments of physical education. Nonetheless, some courageous graduate students chose to write dissertations on sporting topics in the hope that they could still secure a position in the academy. These included Robin Lester and Steven Riess at the University of Chicago who completed their dissertations in 1974, later reworked into books in 1995 and 1980, respectively. The 1980s saw more completed dissertations revised into books by scholars in sport studies (Stephen Hardy, 1982), American studies (Elliott Gorn, 1986), and history and physical education (Melvin Adelman, 1986), along with the publication of Jules Tygiel's outstanding *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (1983). Tygiel had always wanted to write this book but, worried that he would not be considered a serious scholar, had written a dissertation on labor history instead.

Contemporary interpretations of the rise of American sport emphasize either the importance of American modernization or the related process of urbanization. This perspective is central to the principal textbooks in American sport history, which include Benjamin G. Rader's *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports* (2009), Elliott Gorn and Warren Goldstein's *A Brief History of American Sports* (1993), Gerald Gems, Linda Borish, and Gertrud Pfister's *Sports in American History: From Colonization to Globalization* (2008), and Richard O. Davies's *Sports in American Life: A History* (2012).

Rader (2009) explains the process by which informal contests evolved to become modern spectator sports. He examines the emergence of an antebellum sporting counterculture that sought to maintain traditional athletic pleasures, and how industrial capitalism, urbanization, and the particular elements of the major sports (boxing,

baseball, football, and track and field) led to the rise of organized sports. He then considers the role of entrepreneurs, sports heroes, and professional athletes; voluntarism; the emergence of a consumer society; and the impact of the progressive sports creed on public behavior in promoting spectator sports in the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, his excellent analysis of postwar sport covers the continued growth of commercial amateur and professional sports, the impact of television, and the growing roles of African Americans and women in major sports.

Gorn and Goldstein (1993) examine the connections between sport and American culture and society, how developments in the broader society and sport influence class and gender identities. The strongest section, written by Gorn, covers the nineteenth century and emphasizes the role of religion, culture, and class. Gorn argues that sport is a means of social control and promotes gender identity. His narrative examines the impact of urbanization, commercialization, professionalization, and promoters. Goldstein's critical discussion of sport in the twentieth century is thematic rather than chronological, and less innovative, covering such topics as sports heroes, the symbolic importance of teams, the (re)integration of major league baseball, and the impact of television, and drugs. Gems, Borish, and Pfister (2008) emphasize what they consider underexplored issues and under-represented groups, and how sport has served as an agency of social change. However, there are too many facts in the book that are not thoroughly connected to American sport history, minorities remain marginalized, and the narrative is fragmented.

Davies's (2012) narrative, the most recent of the four major syntheses, focuses on the twentieth century, especially since World War II, the area of his greatest expertise. His emphasis is on baseball and football, but he also covers NASCAR and intercollegiate football, and prominent sportsmen and sportswomen. He discusses the prime developments in sport and sport's role as a definer of community, and tries to show their relevance to contemporary social history. Davies is a big sports fan, who respects sport and sports heroes but is critical of the corrupting influence of big-time sports.

Despite the now voluminous literature on American sport history, there has not been any previous major effort by scholars to evaluate and examine in depth the methodological and analytic contributions to the field. For valuable but brief historiographic essays, see Adelman (1983), Gerlach (1994), Hardy (1997), Lewis (1991), Riess (1994), and Sammons (1994). One chapter of S. W. Pope and John Nauright's *Routledge Companion to Sports History* (2010) is devoted to American sport history. English professor Donald L. Deardorff II's *Sports: A Reference Guide and Critical Commentary, 1980–1999* (2000) is an underappreciated analysis of a wide variety of topics in American sport, including sport history.

The present book consists of 28 chapters on the historiography of American sport, divided into eight sections. The first consists of four chapters that examine major chronological periods in American sport history: colonial and early America by James Schneider; the Gilded Age and Progressive era by Gerald Gems; the period 1920–1960 by Ryan Swanson; and the period since 1960 by Russ Crawford. In Chapter 1 Schneider argues that historians of the colonial, early national, and antebellum eras contextualize the social and cultural meanings of a product of nation of cultural values, social structures, and environmental factors. His analysis of colonial sport centers on Virginia and Massachusetts, and his focus on the first half of the nineteenth century emphasizes the impact of urbanization. In Chapter 2 Gems considers how historians have evaluated the impact of the processes of urbanization, industrialization, bureaucratization, and immigration on sport; the rise of major spectator sports; and the role of

such social factors as education, class, and gender. Swanson's chapter (3) focuses on an era when the United States became an urban nation. He argues that overarching patterns are difficult to discern because of the great variety of sporting experiences between 1920 and 1960, although historians would agree that sporting options throughout the era were also tempered by racism and sexism. The four decades Swanson examines were characterized by great peaks and troughs, from prosperity in the roaring twenties, with a record standard of living, to depression and war, which limited recreational opportunities, and then back to prosperity, tempered by fears of atomic warfare and human annihilation. Sport in the postwar era was heavily influenced by suburbanization, ghettoization, and the rise of television. In Chapter 4 Crawford analyzes how historians have examined the process of integration; the place of women; the major sports of baseball, football, and basketball; college sport; the Olympics; and the role of the media.

Part II covers two of the major historical processes that shaped the development of sport: industrialization, technology and science, and urbanization. In Chapter 5 Mark Dyreson analyzes how historians have demonstrated that scientific ideas and technological innovations profoundly influenced the development of modern sport in American history. Historians originally examined the impact of the transportation and communication revolutions, industrialization (especially mass production), and then moved on to such matters as the creation of new sports through technological innovation, and the impact of chemistry on sports performance. Joseph Bigott, in Chapter 6, considers how historians have explained the impact of urbanization on the rise and explosion of sport. Historians deal with the connections of sport to urban culture (including the commercialization of leisure), evolving spatial relationships, and cities as the locus of sport, class, ethnicity, entrepreneurship, and politics.

The core of the book examines the historiography of major team and individual sports. No sport has received as extensive attention as baseball, which until recently was the national pastime, and two chapters are devoted to its historiography. People involved in the game, as well as fans, have for years been interested in the game's historical origins, as reflected by the creation of the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1939 in Cooperstown, New York. Leslie Heaphy discusses the baseball literature up to 1920 in Chapter 7. She points to studies on the game's origins, the process by which baseball surpassed cricket, the urban nature of the game, business elements, amateurism versus the professional game, the key figures in the game, and the involvement of women and African Americans. In Chapter 8 Rebecca T. Alpert picks up the story that is presented in overviews of baseball history, focusing on particular dimensions of that history, and considers studies that focus on race, ethnicity, and gender; business and labor histories; as well as books that analyze events in particular eras.

The literature on football is not quite as extensive as on baseball, but it also merits two chapters. Kurt Kemper (Chapter 9) reviews the literature on college football and Anthony Santoro (Chapter 10) covers pro football. Kemper argues that historians have generally interpreted the game in the context of undergraduates – that students invented, nurtured, and developed the game of football largely in response to the social and cultural conditions of the Gilded Age – and this has been the context in which historians have interpreted the game ever since. They have tended to focus on the history (or lack) of reform in the sport, on its organizing agency, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and on such issues as masculinity, regionalism, commercialization, and race. Santoro finds that pro football has received far less scholarly attention than baseball. There has been some scholarship on the origins of pro football, most

of it on the period since the 1960s, dealing with the crucial impact of television, the role of National Football League (NFL) executives and owners, labor relations, threats from rival leagues, sources of profit-making, the process of integration, and how football reflects American culture.

The final team sport we cover is basketball. In Chapter 11 Aram Goudsouzian points out that scholars and journalists have explored the game's origins and its early development as both an amateur and a professional game, though most attention has gone to the rise of big-time college basketball since the 1950s (including the fixing of games), and the history of the National Basketball Association (NBA). There has also been considerable attention to women's and African American basketball

A further section on particular sports deals with major individual sports. The enormous literature on boxing is discussed by Randy Roberts and Andrew Smith in Chapter 12. They point to the emergence of some outstanding scholarship that covers boxing from the bare-knuckles era to the present day. Among the major topics are the legalization of prizefighting; its working-class character; its connection to machine politics, organized crime, and race; and its significance as a mold of manly heroes. Golf and tennis are at the opposite end of the sports spectrum from boxing. Robert Pruter points out in Chapter 13 that these sports are especially useful to study because of their long identification with moneyed people who comprise the country club set. However, recent biographies and monographs have noted the democratization over time of both sports through access at public facilities, with particular attention to professionalization and women's participation. In Chapter 14 David Lucsko offers a wide-ranging analysis of the literature on motor sport. He looks at the writings on racing, from the speed and durability contests in the first days of the sport in the early 1900s, to the rise of oval-track racing, hot-rodding, drag racing and muscle cars, stock-car racing and the evolution of NASCAR, and sports cars and road-course racing. The final chapter (15) in this section examines the scholarship on amateurism and track and field. Alan Katchen discusses the literature on athletic clubs; intercollegiate and interscholastic competition; ethnicity, race, and gender; the Olympics and the Cold War; and professionalization.

The fifth section is entitled "Sport, Government, and the Global Society," and consists of chapters on foreign relations and globalization, and on the Olympics and international competition. Nicholas Sarantakes's chapter, "The United States and International Sport: A Historiography" (16), examines the role of American citizens in promoting the cultural diffusion of American sports as a means to make money and promote American values and the American way of life overseas. He also looks at how historians have analyzed the role of the federal government in the advancement of the US presence in sport overseas to promote US diplomatic goals, particularly during the Cold War, through demonstrating athletic prowess to gain respect from other great powers, sports coaching in less developed countries to win the hearts and minds of their people, and employing sport as a surrogate in diplomatic confrontations (such as in Afghanistan). However, little attention has been given to the use of sport as an entering wedge in encouraging diplomatic contacts between the United States and its enemies, like "ping-pong diplomacy" between the United States and China in the early 1970s, prior to President Nixon's visit to Beijing. The other chapter in this section, by Robert Barney, considers the scholarship on the United States and the modern Olympic movement. Historians have paid particular attention to the Summer Games staged in the United States (1904, 1932, 1984, and 1996), and Games where politics took center stage, namely in 1936 and 1980, and to the lives of American Olympic leaders. Barney

also points out the importance of certain social issues, such as race and gender, and the role of scandal.

Part VI deals with sport and social history, with chapters on ethnicity, the African American athlete, social class, masculinity, and women. Gerald Gems (Chapter 18) surveys the literature on the sporting activities of the old immigrants from western Europe, the new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, and the emerging scholarship on native Americans, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders. Louis Moore begins Chapter 19 by dealing with sport under slavery, and then discusses how historians have considered the impact of Jim Crow on black athletics, which resulted in a separate black athletic world. He then shows how historians analyzed the influence of athletic heroes Jesse Owens and Joe Louis, and the coming of the era of integration. He finishes up with a discussion of the Black Power movement and the situation of African American athletes in the postintegration years. In Chapter 20 Steven Riess considers how historians have dealt with the relationship between class and sport. Historians have looked at the connections between discretionary income, leisure time, and sport. Elites had the broadest sporting options and used expensive sports to certify their status and separate themselves from lesser sorts. The middle class in the antebellum era were largely opposed to sport for moral reasons, but became fervent supporters of a positive sports creed, and ardent sports promoters, players, and spectators. Segments of the working class were members of the antebellum sporting fraternity, but their opportunities declined with the rise of industrial capitalism. Historians argue that sport became more democratic by the 1920s, and especially after World War II.

The last two chapters in Part VI examine gender and sport. Historians have examined the relationship between sport and manliness only since the 1980s. In Chapter 21 Brian Ingrassia considers how sport became viewed as a means of turning boys into men, and by the late nineteenth century it was seen as a means to instill virile qualities into youths in order to differentiate them from more feminine attributes. Ingrassia also points out how sport addressed racial elements of manliness. In Chapter 22 Linda Borish analyzes the growing literature on women that recognizes that sport was until recently considered a manly sphere. Historians found that there were few sportswomen before the late nineteenth century, and that the pioneers were mainly upper class, and often college students who encountered a lot of opposition from female educators. Scholars have studied the lives of prominent women athletes in the 1920s and 1930s, who have been increasingly drawn from the working class. The main focus of specialists has recently been on the period from the 1960s, on the impact of second-generation feminism and of Title IX.

Part VII centers on the connection between capitalism and sport. J. Andrew Ross's chapter (23) on the business of sport focuses on the exceptionality of American sports entrepreneurship. The focus is on pro baseball, football, basketball, and hockey, among which historians see major league baseball as the model. The chapter looks at franchise ownership, the components of profitability, and labor-management relations. James Walker and Robert Bellamy cover the historiography of sport and media in Chapter 24. They discuss how historians have analyzed the development of sports print journalism, including the coverage of individual athletes, events, and sports; the depiction of minorities and women by journalists; the role of radio and television; and the coming of the digital era. In Chapter 25 Robert Trumpbour examines the scholarship on spectators, arenas, and stadiums. He divides this part of the sports business into four categories, beginning in the mid to late nineteenth century when structures were of rudimentary wooden construction. At the tail end of the century came a move to more

expensive, fire-resistant, and “permanent” edifices used for indoor arenas and outdoor major league parks and college stadiums. The third era unfolded in the 1950s with the widespread use of multipurpose taxpayer-funded sports facilities. The final era, which began around 1990, was the emergence of lavish “retro” venues financed by public–private partnerships.

The final section deals with the relationship between sport and American culture. Richard Kimball explores the long relationship between sport and religion in Chapter 26, pointing out how historians have focused on the influence of Puritanism on sporting practices in colonial Massachusetts and the early nineteenth-century Northeast which limited activity. However, once a positive sports creed evolved, Protestant divines were ardent supporters of sport. Muscular Christianity, the YMCA movement, and the social gospel have been thoroughly studied. Religious fundamentalists of all stripes continued to regard sport as a threat, but liberal theologians supported it as a positive force – for example, the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (YMHA) and Christian Youth Outreach (CYO) – to interest youths in their religious background, promote health and fitness, and counter Protestant proselytizers. By the 1920s southern evangelicals had changed their views, and from the 1950s they have been ardent supporters of sport as a means to bring more young men to Christ. Kevin Witherspoon examines the historical scholarship on sport and American culture, which encompasses cinema, music, and literature, in Chapter 27. In Chapter 28 Maureen Smith deals with the genre of biography, which is probably the most popular format for studying sport history, especially measured by book sales. Smith covers both the finest life stories, mainly baseball, written by journalists as well as by academic historians. The biographies are predominantly about athletic heroes, the occasional coaching icon, the uncommon sports entrepreneur, and the rare sports communicator.

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Part I

MAJOR CHRONOLOGICAL ERAS
OF SPORT HISTORY

Chapter One

THE EMERGENCE OF SPORT: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL APPRAISAL OF SPORT IN AMERICA THROUGH 1865

James C. Schneider

To study sport in America prior to 1865 is to examine the origins of many popular activities, as well as to uncover many antiquated and now obscure forms of play. More importantly, it is also to explore how American society and culture took shape and the reasons its development unfolded as it did. Without exception, the best modern work by historians who study sport in the colonial, early national, and antebellum eras analyzes the social and cultural meanings of sporting activity in light of some combination of cultural values, social structures, and environmental factors. It is worth noting that from the outset serious historians of sport sought to uncover links between sport and wider society. But the concerns that animated such studies have varied profoundly. A baseball example illustrates the fundamental change in historical approaches from the earliest days. Perhaps the first formal inquiry about an American sport took place around the turn of the twentieth century. Undertaken by Abraham G. Mills, president of the National League, at the behest of Albert Goodwill Spalding – former player, club owner, and by then a sporting goods magnate – it aimed to settle a debate within the baseball community about the origins of the game. Had baseball evolved from the English game of rounders or was it, as Spalding and others insisted, a uniquely American invention? The Mills Commission favored the latter conclusion from the outset and constructed the myth of Abner Doubleday and Cooperstown on the flimsiest of evidence (Seymour 1960). In contrast, modern historians are interested in the Doubleday story, if at all, largely as a cultural construct (Block 2005). The nature of the relationship between rounders and baseball remains of interest to the extent that it helps mark the emergence of modern sports from traditional folk games. Far from attempting to establish or bolster American exceptionalism, as Mills and Spalding were determined to do, scholars today seek to explore such subjects as the relationship between the emergence of baseball and factors like urbanization and industrialization (Adelman 1986; Goldstein 1989; Riess 1989). It is not much of an overstatement to say that serious modern scholarship addresses the meaning of sport at least as much as it concerns itself

with the development of a sport on the field or track or in the ring. The study of sport has earned a respected place in the eyes of the historical profession, but for many years the opposite view held sway.

For decades, the academy largely ignored sport as a serious subject of study. One rare exception occurred in 1917, when Frederick L. Paxson examined the rise of sport in an article published in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (now the *Journal of American History*), the flagship journal in the field of United States history. Reflecting the immense influence of Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis," Paxson (1917) characterized the emergence of sport as an artifact of the shift from a rural to an urban society. His view of urban life was anything but benign, and sport represented a needed release from the drudgery of factory work and tensions of crowded urban conditions. Given his analytical approach, it is unsurprising that Paxson had almost nothing to say about the period prior to the Civil War. A decade later John Allen Krout (1929) produced the first serious comprehensive history of sport in America, and in 1940 Krout's student, Foster Rhea Dulles, published the most influential early history of US sport, *America Learns to Play* (1965 [1940]). As his title implies, Dulles, like Paxson and Krout, was primarily interested in charting the origins and development of major American sports. Dulles treated his subject seriously and was alert to the suspect nature of the Cooperstown myth. However, he largely focused on the post-Civil War period, other than noting a handful of horse races, boxing matches, and baseball games in the earlier era. His work stood, along with Krout's, for many years as the only scholarly attempts to survey sport history in the United States. When Harold Seymour proposed baseball as the topic of his doctoral thesis at Cornell in 1956, he had to convince several dubious members of the faculty that the national pastime was a legitimate subject of historical inquiry (Seymour 1960: v). Occasional exceptions, such as in the work of Carl Bridenbaugh (1938, 1955) on colonial cities, were still brief and cursory. Until well past the mid twentieth century, that skeptical attitude toward sport history prevailed within the historical profession.

Shortly before World War II began, however, a seminal work appeared in Europe that was a harbinger of changing attitudes about what history could and should encompass. In 1938 the eminent Dutch historian Johan Huizinga published *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1955 [1938]). As the author of one of the leading studies of medieval Europe, Huizinga had impeccable credentials as a historian. *Homo Ludens* was a nuanced history of play in Europe, but even more than that it argued for the central importance of play in human society. The book was translated into English and appeared in 1955, at roughly the period when conventions about the proper focus of history were breaking down in a number of areas. A work that has stood the test of time, it remains a key foundation in the study of all forms of leisure.

One final pioneer of sport history in the United States deserves mention. John R. Betts was, like Foster Rhea Dulles, a student of John Krout who continued the Columbia professor's belief that sport was a topic worthy of serious study. In 1953 Betts published "The Technological Revolution and the Rise of Sports, 1850–1900," in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. As the title indicates, the temporal focus of this article lies mostly outside the scope of the present chapter. Its main concern remains in an important sense traditional – the development of institutional sport. But more than any previous scholar Betts began to move beyond the interpretation of sport as a safety valve to explore afresh the relationship between the forces of modernization in the nineteenth century and the rise of organized play. Betts (1953b) saw the emergence of sport as a benign product of industrialization rather than a marker of its pathology.

This article represents an important step in moving the study of sport from the margins to the mainstream, although it was to be another 20 years or so before sport became fully accepted. All the while, Betts (1953a, 1955, 1968) continued to bring out articles in major journals on such topics as changing attitudes within the medical profession about the importance of leisure and exercise to overall health. Tragically, Betts died on the eve of completing his own overview of the history of sport in the United States, which was published as *America's Sporting Heritage, 1850–1950* (1974). Analysis is not its strength – the term “encyclopedic” is used by almost everyone who comments on the book – but it rests on a prodigious amount of primary research, and served as an inspiration and starting point for many a subsequent project. And, as its title indicates, for Betts the important story began only toward the close of the antebellum era.

In sum, sport in general long remained a marginal subject of study for historians. The small number of works that did appear prior to the mid twentieth century largely focused on the post-Civil War era because the major task was conceived as chronicling major modern sports and sporting institutions. But in the 1960s a pronounced series of shifts – toward social and cultural history, toward history “from the bottom up,” and the growing use of analytical and conceptual tools from a range of academic disciplines – helped inaugurate a new era in the study of sport and society. As one element in that shift, historians turned with fresh eyes to the years before, including long before, the Cincinnati Red Stockings became the first overtly professional baseball team, colleges developed modern football, James Naismith nailed a peach basket to a pole, and other similar milestones of American sport history.

Because research has centered predominantly on British America, most examinations of sport in the early colonial period begin with an account of athletic games and leisure pastimes in Britain.¹ Richard Holt (1988) coined the term “festive culture” to describe an extensive set of activities ranging from May Day celebrations to parish feasts which featured physical contests and demonstrations of various sorts. Holt focuses on the small agricultural villages that housed the majority of early modern Britain’s population. The culture he describes was attuned to the rhythms and values of traditional farming. Festive culture varied by region and even from village to village, but everywhere it represented an amalgam of folk values and practices, some of which were of pre-Christian origin. The ecclesiastical calendar provided numerous opportunities for relief from work to celebrate the local saint’s day, and seasonal holidays reflected the key stages of the planting and harvesting cycle. Games and contests figured prominently in all these celebrations, with certain physical activities being associated with specific occasions in many regions. Violence often attended these contests. For Holt, festive culture was central to the lives of early modern Britons. It allowed them to display physical prowess, express thanks for crops, court the opposite sex, evade formal strictures about appropriate behavior, and find escape from the harshness and repetition of everyday life (see also Malcolmson 1973; Struna 1996: 11–24).

How then did this festive culture transfer to the New World? The most exhaustive exploration of the transfer of folk culture from Britain to her North American colonies says little about sport directly. David Hackett Fischer’s *Albion’s Seed* (1989) devotes about a dozen out of 898 pages of text to attitudes toward sport. But the overall analysis of cultural transfer is instructive and important. Fischer places special emphasis on the importance of locality. On the western side of the Atlantic, scholars have from the outset have stressed regional differences in the formation and development of British North America. Fischer extends this focus back to the homeland, noting the transfer of folkways from specific regions of England and Scotland to

specific regions in America. Thus his analysis concurs with Holt's on the importance of specific localities. It is all the more odd, given his nuanced handling of the influence of region, that in addressing sports folkways Fischer (1989) all but ignores that *sine qua non* of historical analysis, change over time. He delivers snapshots of sport in colonial America: his accounts are almost static in their inattention to how sport developed over time. This stands in stark contrast to how virtually all other historians have interpreted the subject.

Consider the landmark article by Timothy H. Breen, "Horses and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling among the Gentry in Virginia," which appeared in 1977 in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, over a decade prior to Fischer's book. Sport in Virginia had already received a lengthy survey by Jane Carson in 1965, but Breen approaches his subject very differently from Carson. Building on the immensely influential work of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), Breen shows how sport or, more accurately, the social behaviors attending athletic contests, can serve as indicators of core cultural values. His focus is specific as to location and time period, namely the Chesapeake region in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but he sees this as a setting in which substantial social changes were underway. By 1700 Virginia was emerging from the serious political, social, and economic unrest that had nearly torn the colony apart in the 1670s and 1680s. Elite planters, most of whom by now were American-born, worked to consolidate their control over colonial institutions in the face of opposition from a series of royal governors who themselves sought to assert their authority more effectively. Virginia was becoming a tri-racial society of white Englishmen, Native Americans, and Africans, as slavery replaced indentured servitude as the main labor force of the tobacco economy with all the fateful implications that resulted. Noting the growth of gambling among the gentry at this time, and the emphasis the gentry put on gambling, Breen posits that betting was a response to changing social conditions that had major symbolic connotations for the Virginia elite and reflected their core values in significant ways. Moreover, because much gambling was done in public, Breen believes that it functioned to promote the status of the gentry in the particular social setting of early eighteenth-century Virginia, relative to commoners, as well as to help them cohere as a social group.

As Geertz had done with Balinese cockfights, Breen interprets horse racing and the gambling that attended it as a social drama. The specific form of racing that emerged as the regional favorite, the quarter mile race, was adopted in part because it served the purposes of social display so well. Virginia, especially the Virginia of the gentry, valued individualism, materialism, and competitiveness. Owning and riding successful horses, and wagering amounts that no ordinary Virginian possessed, let alone could put at risk, defined one as a member of an elite. Furthermore, Breen argues, risk taking did much to help define the very nature of the Chesapeake elite. Gambling reflected the uncertain nature of an uncontrolled tobacco market, and the fact that a planter was willing to risk so much on the outcome of a race expressed his independence and confidence in his own status. Increasingly, races were governed by formally agreed on sets of rules, in order that the outcome would represent a genuine achievement rather than trickery or underhanded tactics. By discussing these and other features of Virginians' conduct of horse racing, Breen reveals the inner workings of a maturing colonial society. Widely discussed and reprinted, his article set the standard for the next generation of sport scholarship. His theme, that sport and gambling represented key markers of social class, was taken up and adapted by many subsequent scholars (e.g., Adelman 1986; Gorn 1985, 1986; Isaac 1982; Kirsch 1989).