

TEACHING SPORTS HISTORY IN THE
AMERICAN SURVEY COURSE

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One of the most interesting and perhaps surprising experiences in teaching sports history is the reaction from colleagues not familiar with the growing interest in sports history as an academic field. Typically, a colleague will ask: "Hey John, going to kick the soccer ball around this morning?" Still other colleagues are convinced that sports history must be some kind of recitation of batting averages and field goal percentages. Despite the disparaging comments, sports history has, indeed, become a legitimate field of interest with regard to research, scholarly writing, and teaching. Courses in sports history are being taught in a large number of colleges and universities. The North American Society For Sports History, founded in 1972, boasts an ever-expanding international membership. Its journal, the Journal of Sports History, is a high quality publication with a solid scholarly reputation.¹ Recently, major journals concerned with American history have reviewed books on the subject of sports history.² Although some academics continue to oppose or misunderstand sports history, the number of courses and interest in the field continue to grow.

Today it would be most unusual for an academic historian to be unfamiliar with courses taught in the field of sports history. Few of them, however, may be aware of the increasing interest in integrating sports history into the basic American survey course. What better way to teach students than to relate to them central themes of the American past in terms of a subject which many of them profess to love and to know something about!

Professors often complain that they find it difficult to teach certain themes or eras in American history because students are unfamiliar with the times, people, or subject matter at hand. Nothing in the students' experience, it is often stated, allows them to fully grasp the dynamics of the period in terms of their own life experience. An emphasis on sports and specific changes in athletics as they relate to larger issues of the past might serve as a link for the contemporary student in connecting essential themes in American history with their current knowledge of the world. Most students are familiar with sports and might more readily comprehend technological advancements, economic changes, or labor relations in a given era by focusing on sporting themes. An analysis of the formation of the National League of baseball in 1876, for example, illustrates very well the importance of the railroad and other advances in transportation and communication, the trend toward monopoly in business, and the difficulties organized labor faced in this period.

An important question teachers of the survey course will face is whether to emphasize sports as an aspect of social history or to use athletic themes to highlight economic, social, political, and diplomatic topics in a more general framework. It is my view that sports history in and of itself can stand alone in many parts of the survey course. Joseph Strutt pointed out many years ago that, "In order to form a just estimation of the character of any particular people, it is absolutely necessary to investigate the Sports and Pastimes most generally prevalent among them."³ In general, however, sports history can be more effectively utilized in the American survey course as an aid or vehicle to the more efficient exploration of basic themes of our past which students need to comprehend. This view is not based on the questionable belief held by some that history must be relevant to be worth knowing or worth teaching. Sports history, in my opinion, should only be used to highlight major themes in the survey course when it is more effective than traditional methods in informing the student.

The use of sports history in the American survey is clearly more applicable in the second part of the course. American sports are simply more diverse and a more vital part of society in the post-Civil War era. Certain sports themes can be used effectively in the first half of the survey whether the breaking point is at 1865 or 1877. The following are examples of topics commonly covered in the pre-1877 era which lend themselves to partial or extensive coverage through the use of sports history: culture of the American Indians (the contrast between religious and secular sporting activities); the influence of Puritanism (the Protestant work ethic as a check on the growth of sports); elite groups and leisure activities (informal sporting and recreational pursuits in the era before organized sports); military training and the Civil War (the link between physical fitness and military preparedness); the origins of racial segregation (sports as a barometer of racial tensions during Reconstruction). Some themes in the American survey, particularly in the first half, are not well suited to a proper examination through the use of sports history. This is largely the case because sports or at least organized sports were restricted to a small segment of society in the pre-Civil War era. The enterprising teacher, however, might well find it worthwhile to explain the reasons for the absence of organized sports on a large scale (e.g., long working hours, low wages, primitive transportation and communications, social customs) and in the process focus on the nature of a pre-industrial society.

In the second half of the survey, such major themes as Populism, the Spanish-American War, and the Treaty of Versailles, to name a few topics, do not lend themselves well to an examination through sports. Other major survey themes are particularly adaptable to a thorough study by highlighting sports themes. It is not often wise, however, to cover a whole topic by exclusively using sports as a theme. In my experience, it is more effective to examine a topic from several different angles, including sports. This approach tends to give emphasis and re-emphasis to certain interpretations or themes one wants the student to grasp. In treating the Progressive Era, for example, it might be well to begin with the traditional political-social approach and then examine boxing to focus on certain contradictions embedded in the reform era. The controversy over Jack Johnson as heavyweight champion might be used to illustrate one of the blind spots of progressive reform in that period.

In addition to Progressivism, other themes or topics that are well-suited to an effective study through sports history are industrialization (1870-1900). Reconstruction, cultural aspects of the 1920s, women's rights, violence, civil rights, and the cold war. With regard to the last mentioned topic, an examination of the Olympic movement since 1945 is particularly illustrative of the erratic course of Soviet-American relations in the postwar period. The American popular reaction to the dramatic U.S. ice hockey victory at Lake Placid in February, 1980, and the subsequent boycott of the Moscow Summer Games of 1980 emphasize the importance of athletic contests in East-West relations. A lecture on the "Golden Era" of American sports in the 1920s, moreover, gives the student an appreciation of the social changes taking place in post-World War I America. The public's idolization of Babe Ruth illustrates many facets of the popular mood of the times.

The discussion of other topics can be enhanced by reference to themes from sports, but do not lend themselves to a thorough examination by the use of sports history. In this category, I would place the New Deal, foreign policy of the 1930s, and the growth of the American economy in the post-World War II period to name a few such topics. A lecture on or discussion of either the Joe Louis-Max Schmeling fight or the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936 could emphasize the tactics and threat of Nazism in the course of studying foreign policy in the 1930s. In a similar manner, a lecture on the expansion of professional sports teams and their tendency toward increasing corporate

structure might add to student understanding of changes in the post-World War II economy.

How does the survey teacher become familiar himself with sports history and what themes or topics might be useful in a course? A few standard sports history textbooks are as follows:

Foster Rhea Dulles, America Learns to Play: A History of Recreation (New York, 1965). This book is particularly good in integrating sports, recreation, popular amusements, and other leisure activities. Although it has been revised, it does not cover the period after 1930 very well.

John R. Betts, America's Sporting Heritage, 1850-1950 (Reading, Massachusetts, 1974). This volume is by a pioneer and accomplished sports historian. It is particularly good in offering interpretations of sports history useful in the survey course.

John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, Saga of American Sports (Philadelphia, 1978). This is the most recent survey of American sports history. It covers the early period very well and is strong in most areas up to the 1960s.

All three of these books are valuable as sources for information, interpretations, and bibliography in sports history. They could be used as a text in a standard American survey course, but are in general too detailed and focus too exclusively on sports themes to be of use in the survey course. Survey teachers might be well advised to use these books as a source for details and interpretations. Several texts presently being published might be of interest to survey teachers. They are: Benjamin G. Rader, American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., in press); Douglas A. Novner and Lawrence E. Ziewacz, The Games They Played: American Sports and Culture, 1865-1980 (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, in press); William J. Baker, Sports in the Western World (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, in press).

Sports anthologies or collections of original essays on sports are better suited as collateral reading to supplement the basic American survey textbook. Unfortunately not many of these books have been published to date. Two recent volumes of this nature are William J. Baker and John M. Carroll, eds., Sports in Modern America (St. Louis: River City Publishers, 1981), and Steven A. Riess, ed., American Sport History: An Anthology (Dubuque: Kendall-Hunt, in press). The Baker-Carroll volume is a collection of fourteen original essays specifically designed to accompany lectures and standard textbooks in part two of the American survey course. The Riess book is a collection of mostly previously published journal essays covering themes in both parts of the survey course. Some survey teachers might also find it useful to assign sports biographies or sports book focusing on specific themes such as baseball, women, violence, or the Olympics.⁴

The use of sports history in the American survey course can be rewarding for the teacher and student alike. In my experience, it has been stimulating to see poor to average students who were lethargic in the first half of the survey course perk up and perform well in part two when sports became a central focus. These students became more interested, they told me, because for the first time they could relate historical themes to a field in which they believed they had some prior competence. In fact, they were learning the same material I had previously taught but approached in a more traditional manner. The use of sports history simply highlighted and reinforced these traditional themes and interpretations. In addition, the use of sports history and collateral reading stimulated much more discussion than was normal in my survey sections. Again, students felt more confident in speaking out when basic themes were presented

through sports history because they believed they already knew something about sports--few had similar convictions about American history per se. The use of sports history in the American history survey course can be a gimmick or a useful stimulus toward greater understanding of history by the student involved. The survey teacher has to do his homework and use sports history judiciously for it to be a useful tool.

NOTES

¹The Journal of Sports History is edited by Jack W. Berryman of the University of Washington and is published three times a year by the North American Society for Sports History.

²For example, The Journal of American History and the American Historical Review have reviewed Allen Guttman, From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports (New York, 1978); Steven A. Riess, Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era (Westport, Connecticut, 1980); Richard C. Crepeau, Baseball: America's Diamond Mind, 1919-1941 (Gainesville, 1980); Randy Roberts, Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler (Baton Rouge, 1979). Most of these reviews have been quite favorable.

³Joseph Strutt's quote is in Allen Guttman, "Who's on First? or, Books on the History of American Sports," The Journal of American History, LXVI (September 1979), 348-54. Guttman's article is an excellent introduction to some of the important books on sports history as well as to the state of sports history as an academic field.

⁴Guttman's article cited above is a good source for books of this nature. I have also given a select list of some useful books at the end of this essay.

A SELECT LIST OF BOOKS USEFUL IN PREPARING
SURVEY LECTURES ON SPORTS THEMES

Dan Atyeo, Blood and Guts: Violence in Sports (London, 1970).
A recent commentary on the contemporary issue of violence.

Frederick W. Cozens and Florence Stumpf, Sports in American Life (Chicago, 1953).
An overview of the development of sports in America.

Richard Espy, The Politics of the Olympic Games (Berkeley, California, 1979).
An examination of sports and international politics focusing on the Olympic movement.

Al-Tony Gilmore, Bad Nigger: The National Impact of Jack Johnson (Port Washington, New York, 1975). An excellent biography of one of the foremost and controversial black athletes.

Allen Guttman, From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports (New York, 1978). An interpretive examination of the place of sports in society.

Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (Boston, 1955). An excellent study on the question of the relationship of play, games, and sports to society.

Neil D. Issacs, All the Moves: A History of College Basketball (Philadelphia, 1975). A good survey of one of the big three American sports.

- James Michener, Sports in America (New York, 1976). A useful popular account of sports in American life.
- Steven A. Riess, Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era (Westport, Connecticut, 1980). A detailed and interpretive study of America's national game in the early 1900s.
- Marshall Smelser, The Life That Ruth Built (New York, 1975). An excellent biography of one of America's greatest athletes.
- Dale A. Somers, The Rise of Sports in New Orleans, 1850-1900 (Baton Rouge, 1972). A case study of the development of sports in a major American city.
- Alexander M. Weyand, The Saga of American Football (New York, 1975). A useful overview of the development of the gridiron sport.