

Sport and American Society

Exceptionalism, Insularity and 'Imperialism'

Edited by
**Mark Dyreson and
J.A. Mangan**



Sport in the Global Society

Sport and American Society: Exceptionalism, Insularity and 'Imperialism'

Whilst other nations resisted British sporting hegemony, none rejected the particular team games that resided at the heart of the British games ethic as strenuously or successfully as the nation born in the eighteenth-century rebellion to British imperial control. The United States created a different set of patriotic team games. More than a century later these games – American football, baseball and basketball – endure at the centre of American sporting culture, even as globalization alters their structures and as the United States dallies with that most enduring of old British exports that now holds the mantle of 'the world's game'.

This collection of essays on 'Sport in American Society', by scholars trained in anthropology, history, philosophy and sociology, returns to territory first illuminated by Turner and Paxson in order to shed new light on the ways in which American sport contributes to historic and contemporary insularity, exceptionalism and imperialism; themes which have for more than a century stood at the centre of historical interpretations of the development of the United States.

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Sport in the Global Society

General Editors: J.A. Mangan and Boria Majumdar

Sport and American Society Exceptionalism, Insularity and 'Imperialism'

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Eric Hobsbawm once called sport one of the most significant practices of the late nineteenth century. Its significance was even more marked in the late twentieth century and will continue to grow in importance into the new millennium as the world develops into a 'global village' sharing the English language, technology and sport.

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Series Editors' Foreword

J. A. Mangan and Boria Majumdar

SPORT IN THE GLOBAL SOCIETY was launched in the late nineties. It now has over one hundred volumes. Until recently an odd myopia characterised academia with regard to sport. The global *groves of academe* remained essentially Cartesian in inclination. They favoured a mind/body dichotomy: thus the study of ideas was acceptable; the study of sport was not. All that has now changed. Sport is now incorporated, intelligently, within debate about *inter alia* ideologies, power, stratification, mobility and inequality. The reason is simple. In the modern world sport is everywhere: it is as ubiquitous as war. E.J. Hobsbawm, the Marxist historian, once called it the one of the most significant of the new manifestations of late nineteenth century Europe. Today it is one of the most significant manifestations of the twenty-first century world. Such is its power, politically, culturally, economically, spiritually and aesthetically, that sport beckons the academic more persuasively than ever- to borrow, and refocus, an expression of the radical historian Peter Gay – ‘to explore its familiar terrain and to wrest new interpretations from its inexhaustible materials’. As a subject for inquiry, it is replete, as he remarked of history, with profound ‘questions unanswered and for that matter questions unasked’.

Sport seduces the teeming ‘global village’; it is the new opiate of the masses; it is one of the great modern experiences; its attraction astonishes only the recluse; its appeal spans the globe. Without exaggeration, sport is a mirror in which nations, communities, men and women now see themselves. That reflection is sometimes bright, sometimes dark, sometimes distorted, sometimes magnified. This metaphorical mirror is a source of mass exhilaration and depression, security and insecurity, pride and humiliation, bonding and alienation. Sport, for many, has replaced religion as a source of emotional catharsis and spiritual passion, and for many, since it is among the earliest of memorable childhood experiences, it infiltrates memory, shapes enthusiasms, serves fantasies. To co-opt Gay again: it blends memory and desire.

Sport, in addition, can be a lens through which to scrutinise major themes in the political and social sciences: democracy and despotism and the great associated movements of socialism, fascism, communism and capitalism as well as political cohesion and confrontation, social reform and social stability.

The story of modern sport is the story of the modern world-in microcosm; a modern global tapestry permanently being woven. Furthermore, nationalist and

imperialist, philosopher and politician, radical and conservative have all sought in sport a manifestation of national identity, status and superiority.

Finally, for countless millions sport is the personal pursuit of ambition, assertion, well-being and enjoyment.

For all the above reasons, sport demands the attention of the academic. *Sport in the Global Society* is a response.

J. A. Mangan
Boria Majumdar

Series Editors
Sport in the Global Society

Prologue: The Paradoxes of American Insularity, Exceptionalism and Imperialism

Mark Dyreson

The themes of insularity, exceptionalism and imperialism have for more than a century stood at the centre of historical interpretations on the development of the United States. Frederick Jackson Turner's landmark essay, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', which he delivered at the American Historical Association's meeting at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, drew its strength from those three concepts. [1] Turner's frontier meditation has had, as another American historical luminary, Charles Beard, proclaimed, 'a more profound influence on thought about American history than any other essay or volume ever written on the subject'. [2]

In constructing the 'frontier thesis' Turner argued that American insularity, particularly the separation of American culture from European civilization, provided a unique environment for growth. That environment, 'the frontier', created a society that stood as an exception to the standard forces of history which determined the evolution of Europe and much of the rest of the world. The conquest of the frontier also sowed the seeds of American empire in the ceaseless quest to bring the exceptional fruits of American 'civilization' to the 'savage' realms of the earth. [3]

In the century since Turner's declaration of the unique character of American history, the frontier thesis has marked the departure point for voyages of exploration into the nation's past. Turner did not include sport in his original version of the frontier thesis, but as early as 1917 one of his students, Frederic Paxson, connected sport to American exceptionalism, insularity and empire. In the year that the United States entered the Great War, a historical moment that marked the ascension of the American republic to a role as the world's leading power, Paxson proclaimed athletic contests as a fitting substitute for the old frontier and promised 'honest sport' would produce 'a new Americanism for a new century'. [4]

This collection of essays on 'Sport in American Society' by scholars trained in anthropology, history, philosophy and sociology, returns to territory first illuminated

by Turner and Paxson in order to shed new light on the ways in which American sport contributes to historic and contemporary insularity, exceptionalism and imperialism. Linda Borish and Tim Elcombe reveal how American exceptionalism produces periodic spasms of reform in American sport. Borish and Elcombe also demonstrate that American recreational and athletic reformations evolve from remarkably insular discourses. The recreational reforms proposed to improve the lives of ante-bellum women did not look to similar trends in nineteenth-century European 'gymnastics', nor did Jack Scott bother to incorporate twentieth-century European neo-Marxist attacks against the athletic 'establishment' to bolster his 'revolution'. [5]

In very different fashions Holly Swyers and Murry Nelson investigate how American insularity produces community in the nation's heartlands. Nelson uncovers the small-town Midwestern roots of professional basketball while Swyer excavates the Chicago commune known as Wrigley Field in search of the secrets of civic identity. My contribution to the volume probes how notions of American exceptionalism pushed US media corporations to challenge the early efforts of the international Olympic movement to control and sell pictorial images of the Olympic Games. During the 1920s these firms, in concert with the US government, deliberately sought to Americanize globalization. Sean Frederick Brown also examines the power of exceptionalism in shaping the habits of American consumers of sport. Brown's study raises questions about the model presented in the much-heralded analysis by Andrei S. Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman entitled *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism*. [6] Brown suggests that American spectators are perhaps more interested in watching American players than they are in patronizing sports with venerable American lineages such as baseball and basketball that have recently been globalized by an influx of foreign players.

John Kelly expands Brown's foray into the differences between American and global inclusion. In two closely linked essays Kelly probes the power of Jackie Robinson's integration of baseball in shaping American and world history. Kelly discovers, following Jules Tygiel's seminal work, [7] that baseball's 'great experiment' reconfigured American nationhood. Kelly explains that the integration of the 'national pastime' within the United States ironically cemented the insularity of American professional leagues, preventing an alternative history in which Latin American and Asian players and teams might have been systematically incorporated into more global version of baseball. Benjamin Eastman's inspection of the interpretations of Cuban baseball star Adolfo Luque in both the United States and Cuba continues the analysis of race, nation and sport. Eastman uses the themes of American exceptionalism and imperialism to chronicle the ways in which Cuban rejection of American hegemony through public discussions of Luque's triumphs and tribulations shaped twentieth-century Cuban discourses on national identity.

Susan Brownell concludes the volume with a forecast of the looming sporting conflict between the United States and another civilization with a long history

of insularity, exceptionalism and imperialism, China. Brownell's study uncovers the paradoxes inherent in the histories of sportswomen as icons of national exceptionalism in both American and Chinese cultures. Brownell caps her investigation by highlighting the irony of China's desire to erase Western Orientalist conceptions of Chinese impotence by turning the tables on the West, particularly the United States, at the 2008 Beijing Games. Brownell concludes that if an avalanche of Olympic victories in 2008 crushes the old Western imperialist stereotype of China as the 'sick man of East Asia', it will not signal a simple paradigm shift in the patterns of global cultural imperialism but rather the triumph of a peculiarly Western logic in Chinese culture. That logic proclaims that sporting prowess symbolizes national power.

Brownell's essay highlights the persistence of nationalism even in this much ballyhooed age of globalization. The globalization of modern sport is sometimes misread as a sign of the decline of nationalism and other forms of modern tribalism. A different reading recognizes that while certain sports have indeed become global phenomena, the now more than two-centuries-old practice of forging national identity through sport represents the dominant feature of this particular layer of globalization. [8] Originating in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-American cultures, [9] sport has served since the mid twentieth century as, in the words of the leading historian of modern nationalism, E.J. Hobsbawm, a 'uniquely effective ... medium for inculcating national feelings'. [10] The patriotic frenzies generated by Kenyan runners, Pakistani cricketers, Brazilian soccer players, Norwegian cross-country skiers and Bulgarian weight lifters testify to the fact that the United States has not entirely cornered the market on sporting proclamations of national exceptionalism.

With that caveat stipulated, American historians have followed the trail blazed by Frederick Jackson Turner and identified exceptionalism, insularity and imperialism as the fulcrums of American nationhood and American sporting traditions. [11] They have also pointed to the strange paradoxes that emerge from the collisions of exceptionalism, insularity and empire. Paradoxes, as Professor J.A. Mangan identifies at the beginning of his epilogue to this volume [12], drive American culture and require historians such as Elliot Gorn and Warren Goldstein to paint American sport as sordid and transcendent, crude and refined. [13] Gorn and Goldstein share an affection for paradoxes with Turner, who penned his 'frontier thesis' at a historical moment in which he claimed the frontier had closed, imperilling American exceptionalism with the prospect that a 'frontier-less' United States would become just like Europe. Some of Turner's readers have responded to his warning by calling for the discovery and conquest of new frontiers. Turner's ideas have since the 1890s invigorated American imperialists. Other readers, such as Frederic Paxson, imagined that new frontiers could be found on athletic fields rather than in an expansionist foreign policy. One particularly important American power broker, Theodore Roosevelt, decided that frontiers for keeping American exceptionalism vibrant could be discovered in both sport and empire. [14]

Since the last decade of the nineteenth century American insularity, exceptionalism and imperialism have been bound in an ironic symmetry by a fervent national devotion to sport. The paradoxes involved in these confluences rush to the surface in reflecting on the central premise of the provocative *National Pastime: How Americans Play Baseball and the Rest of the World Plays Soccer* (2005), and several other cultural critiques that survey the same terrain. [15] These commentaries ground themselves in the unassailable claim that most Americans perceive soccer as a strange foreign game, inferior to the home-grown national trinity of American football, baseball and basketball.

What then, should one make of the news that in the August 2005 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) rankings the United States ranks sixth in the world in the 'beautiful game', ahead of perennial powers and former World Cup champions France, England, Germany, Italy and Uruguay? [16] The American team's ranking is stunning given the fact that soccer's charms are lost on much of the American public. The Major Soccer League (MSL), the nation's professional league, garners mediocre attendance and television ratings compared to more 'American' pastimes. In desperation the MSL has even franchised a branch of a famous Mexican league team, Chivas, into Los Angeles in an effort to bolster soccer's 'American' market share by attracting Mexican fans. [17]

In the face of this tepid native fan interest, what should one make of the statistical reality that Americans play soccer as frequently as any other team sport except for basketball? Per capita participation in baseball and American football has declined markedly in the last four decades. Basketball participation has remained stable. The number of Americans of all ages playing soccer, however, has mushroomed dramatically. Soccer now ranks with volleyball and softball in the second tier of the most popular team sports to play in the United States. Soccer's tier ranks ahead of American football and baseball. [18] Still, although Americans play soccer frequently, and play it quite well at the highest international level, most Americans cannot fairly be described as devotees of 'the world's game'. Americans play exceptional soccer but American exceptionalism creates a barrier against including soccer in the American stable of national pastimes – a paradox indeed.

American exceptionalism and American insularity are confirmed by the fact that when the US national team plays World Cup qualifiers in Los Angeles or New York or Miami or Washington, DC, far more enthusiastic throngs of Mexicans or Guatemalans or Costa Ricans or Hondurans turn out than do passionate supporters of Uncle Sam's eleven. So little do most Americans care for soccer that fans fail to protect home field advantage – a remarkable sign of insularity. Paradoxically, the very insularity which tempers soccer enthusiasm produces a tolerance for displays of foreign nationalism unimaginable in soccer-mad nations. As the journalist Franklin Foer observed while watching a US vs. Honduras match in which more than half of the fans in the American national capital sported the blue-and-white colours of the Central American republic, Robert F. Kennedy Stadium 'might as well have been in Tegucigalpa'. Foer read the event as a retort to European claims that American

insularity is relentlessly 'hypernationalistic', wondering 'is there any country in the world that would tolerate such animosity to their national capital?' Foer added that 'in England or France or Italy, this would have been cause for unleashing hooligan hell'. [19]

American exceptionalism produces a cloying insularity. The self-proclaimed 'world championships' contested in the professional ranks of American football, baseball and basketball stick in the craws of foreign observers who rightly point out that American cities and the occasional Canadian metropolis rather than 'the world' compete for these crowns. For all their parochialism, however, the teams that comprise contemporary Major League baseball have remarkably cosmopolitan rosters. Latin American and Asian stars play in front of enthusiastic crowds of monolingual American fans. The original American national pastime has spread to other parts of the world. Contrary to the provocative subtitle of *National Pastime*, some parts of the rest of the world do play baseball. As the historian Arthur Mann pointed out in his underappreciated study of American identity, *The One and the Many*, while 'the world' routinely criticizes the US for seeking to homogenize immigrants through sport and other cultural tools, Americans have taken in more of the world's huddled masses than the rest of the world combined. [20]

This American paradox of insularity and openness so evident in twenty-first century Major League baseball has not yet touched American football but it is swallowing basketball. European, Asian, Latin American and African players show up in ever larger numbers in the National Basketball Association and in American collegiate ranks. Foreign players are becoming major stars in the United States. At the same time, other nations beat the United States so routinely in international basketball competitions such as the Olympic Games that it becomes increasingly difficult for Americans to explain away these losses in the one American game actually invented in the United States, albeit by a Canadian, as 'upsets'. [21]

In surveying the landscapes of American history it is important to keep in mind that especially in sports American exceptionalism and insularity represent reactions to imperialism, specifically to those 'most enduring exports' of the British empire, soccer and cricket. [22] American football and baseball emerged not only as expressions of American exceptionalism and empire but as explicit rejections of British exceptionalism and empire. Whilst other nations, particular Ireland, [23] resisted British sporting hegemony, none rejected the particular team games that resided at the heart of the British games ethic as strenuously or successfully as the nation born in the eighteenth-century rebellion to British imperial control. The United States created a different set of patriotic team games. More than a century later these games – American football, baseball and basketball – endure at the centre of American sporting culture, even as globalization alters their structures and as the United States dallies with that most enduring of old British exports that now holds the mantle of 'the world's game'. The United States has joined the ranks of the world's soccer powers. Ironically, that news means little to most American sports fans. Insularity, exceptionalism and imperialism breed paradoxical sporting histories.

These paradoxes make it difficult to predict what directions the ‘new Americanism’ – as Frederic Paxson so aptly labelled it – generated by sport in this ‘new century’ will ultimately take. One prediction, however, seems a safe bet. American sport will continue to promote the nation rather than the global community.

Notes

- [1] Revisions, rejections and reinterpretations of the ‘frontier thesis’ remain a major industry in American historiographies of exceptionalism. See Arnon Gutfeld, *American Exceptionalism: The effects of Plenty on the American Experience* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002); David Hackett Fischer and James C. Kelly, *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2000); Allan G. Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Strange Roads Going Down* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); John Mack Faragher (ed.), *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ and Other Essays* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994); David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1993); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992); James D. Bennett, *Frederick Jackson Turner* (Boston, MA: Twayne, 1975); Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Richard L. Rapson, *Major Interpretations of the American Past* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971); George Rogers Taylor, *The Turner Thesis: Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*, 3rd edn (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1971); Ray Allen Billington, *The Frontier Thesis: Valid Interpretation of American History?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966); David W. Noble, *Historians Against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing Since 1830* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1965).
- [2] Cited in Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp.47–8.
- [3] Frederick Jackson Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, in Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), pp.1–38.
- [4] Frederic L. Paxson, ‘The Rise of Sport’, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 4, 2 (Sept. 1917), 143–68. Quotation from page 168.
- [5] See, for instance, Jean Marie Brohm, *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time*, trans. Ian Fraser (London: Ink Links, 1978); and Bero Rigauer, *Sport and Work*, trans. A. Guttmann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). For deconstructions of neo-Marxist interpretations of sport, see Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) and William J. Morgan, *Leftist Theories of Sport: A Critique and Reconstruction* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
- [6] Andrei S. Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman, *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- [7] Jules Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*, 2nd revised edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- [8] Mark Dyreson, ‘Globalizing the Nation-Making Process: Modern Sport in World History’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 20, 1 (March 2003), 91–106.
- [9] For critical analyses of sport in the British Empire see J.A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981; 2nd revised edn, London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2000); J.A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal*

- (New York: Viking, 1986; 2nd revised edn, London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998); J.A. Mangan (ed.), *The Imperial Curriculum: Racial Images and Education in British Colonial Experience* (London: Routledge, 1993); Richard Holt, *Sport and the British* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). For American sporting traditions, see Mel Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820–1870* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Warren Goldstein, *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); George B. Kirsch, *The Creation of American Team Sports: Baseball and Cricket, 1838–1872* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1979); Peter Levine, A.G. *Spalding and the Rise of Baseball* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Steven Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989).
- [10] E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.143.
- [11] Richard Crepeau, *Baseball: America's Diamond Mind, 1919–1941* (Orlando, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1980); Allen Guttman, *A Whole New Ball Game: An Interpretation of Modern Sport* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Donald J. Morzek, *Sport and American Mentality, 1880–1910* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1983); S.W. Pope, *Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination, 1876–1926* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- [12] J.A. Mangan, “‘Empire in Denial’: An Exceptional Kind of Imperialism’, in this issue, pp. 1194–1197.
- [13] Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sport* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), p.xii. Gorn and Goldstein also finish their ‘Epilogue’ by examining the paradoxes of American sporting experiences. See pp.251–4.
- [14] Mark Dyreson, *Making the American Team: Sport, Culture and the Olympic Experience* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998).
- [15] Stefan Szymanski and Andrew Zimbalist, *National Pastime: How Americans Play Baseball and the Rest of the World Plays Soccer* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2005). Two similar studies have appeared recently: Franklin Foer, *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), and Markovits and Hellerman, *Offside*.
- [16] Online at <http://www.fifa.com/en/mens/statistics/index/0,2548,All-Jul-2005,00.html>, accessed 15 Aug. 2005.
- [17] Grant Wahl, ‘Football vs. Futbol’, *Sports Illustrated*, 5 July 2004, 68–75; David Davis, ‘Conquistador in Cleats’, *Los Angeles Times*, 13 March 2005, I-8.
- [18] Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association International, ‘The SGMA Report: Sports Participation Topline Report, 2005 Edition, Statistical Highlights from Superstudy® of Sports Participation’, online at <http://www.sgma.com/reports/data/2005/p28b-05.pdf>, accessed 15 Aug. 2005. For an excellent appendix detailing the demography of soccer participation see Markovits and Hellerman, *Offside*, pp.275–81.
- [19] Foer, *How Soccer Explains the World*, pp.246–7.
- [20] Arthur Mann, *The One and the Many: Reflections on the American Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp.75–6.
- [21] Mike Wise, ‘International Spurs Outsource NBA Title’, *Washington Post*, 25 June 2005, E-5; L. Elmore, ‘Foreign Focus Holds the Cure for What Ails the NBA’, *Street-and-Smith's Sportbusiness Journal*, 27 Oct.–2 Nov. 2003, 35; J. Lombardo, ‘Influx of Foreign Players Mean New Challenges for NBA Games’, *Street-and-Smith's Sportbusiness Journal*, 23–29 July 2001, 24; C. Rosen, ‘A World of Difference’, *Inside Sports*, January 1997, 56–62; M. Shaw, ‘Coming

- to America', *FIBA Basketball Monthly*, Dec. 1996, 68–70; 'From Team USA to NBA', *Sports Illustrated*, 6 July 1992, 64; Laura Van Tuyl, 'American Game, Foreign Players', *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 March 1989, 14; Jack McCallum, 'Tomorrow the World: Don't Let the 'N' in NBA Fool You', *Sports Illustrated*, 7 Nov. 1988, 58–63.
- [22] J.A. Mangan (ed.), *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society* (London: Frank Cass, 1992); Allen Guttman, *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Culture Imperialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Bill Murray, *The World's Game: A History of Soccer* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998).
- [23] Mike Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic Games, Soccer and Irish Identity Since 1884* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1999).

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Benevolent America: Rural Women, Physical Recreation, Sport and Health Reform in Ante-Bellum New England

Linda J. Borish

Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century, rural reformers of white middle- and upper-class rural women and men sympathetic to farm women's harsh physical condition, women farm journalists and farm women themselves sought to alleviate the plight of women on the farm and the gender strain they faced by amending their heavy workload in farm life. Dissatisfied with their situation, rural women desired a better life than the tiresome work and discordant gender dynamics they experienced on farmsteads in ante-bellum New England. Within the cultural context of greater choices for farm daughters and the depopulation of the farm, farm women began to

discern new options available to them, extending beyond the confines of their rural world in American society. Agricultural reformers offered farm women a picture of how their life might be improved through some mending of farm practices, in the hope of stemming women's and daughters' flight from the countryside. In the gendered viewpoints of rural reform, women exerted their sway to alter the conditions they linked to their poor health and to renovate their physical fitness on the farm.

As one corrective for farm women's feeble health, rural commentators prescribed wholesome outdoor physical recreation and sporting activities disassociated from work. Farm women perceived that the voluntary physical activity of sport could replenish women's robust health, while the required physical activity of laborious domestic chores depleted it. How did physical recreation serve as a form of rejuvenation for farm women, enabling them to restore bodily energy sapped in persistent exercise of their physical labours? What sporting activities became a means for women to gain control of bodily exercise in healthful ways in their outdoor pursuits? By walking, horseback riding, cultivating fruits and flowers and swimming, and in winter sports such as ice skating, the farm woman could renovate her health. This primary research on ante-bellum rural women's health reform and sporting activities examines the farm press such as the *Boston Cultivator*, *New England Farmer*, *Connecticut Homestead* and *American Agriculturist*, the diaries and letters of farm women and men, rural advice books and material culture. The historical study of ante-bellum rural women, often neglected by sport and health historians concentrating on urban women, explores the social changes rural women promoted that enhanced their physical well-being and power in the farm family. The farm environs of women's lives shaped the kinds of physical exercises and sporting activities women pursued in their health reforms in rural New England.

Rural health advisers and journalists suggested that farm women needed a recess from arduous work and advised them to take part in sport and physical amusements for health conservation. Such options, however, were class based, with women in middle- and upper-rank farm families having better chances for any lull in their household routine than women in the lower ranks. Agricultural reform journalists and farm women generally encouraged improvements in women's physical well-being and believed that sport and the exercise of a voluntary physical pursuit went in tandem with robust health and the cheery demeanour of farm women and girls. A farm lass put the matter this way in 1857 when addressing Connecticut farmers' daughters who worked constantly as 'Homespun Daughters'. This 'Massachusetts Lass' explained: 'We are told "there is a time for all things, a time to work and a time to play;" then where would these girls find authority for *all work*?' She concluded: 'I don't wonder it had the same effect it would have had on Jack if he had not been allowed some play.' [1] Farm wives and daughters taking a respite from their important work on the farmstead, using their muscles in sport and recreation, rather than intense exhausting domestic work, might well be rejuvenated and obtain sound health.

Some Perspectives on Health Reform in Ante-Bellum America

For many health and urban reformers in the mid-nineteenth century, living away from the farmstead and agricultural life, the ante-bellum farm woman they envisioned displayed robust health in wholesome outdoor conditions. Ante-bellum health reformers such as Catharine Beecher and Thomas Wentworth Higginson tended to picture farm women as models of health compared to weak urban women. Historians have critiqued the city rather than the country, and contrasted urban life with rural life in the supposed differences in the health of urban and rural females in the nineteenth century. [2]

In the presumed urban-rural dichotomy in ante-bellum women's health, a conflict in cultural values shaped urban social critics' glowing views of women's robust health on the homestead. Perhaps the most notable and prominent nineteenth-century female health and education reformer, Catharine Beecher (1800–1878) believed that farm women represented archetypes of outstanding health and happiness, particularly when compared to sickly urban women. Beecher lamented that city women pursued a path of physical and mental destruction resulting in 'a race of *sickly and deformed pigmies*', [3] whereas country women sustained their hardy well-being in their domestic labour. Beecher wrote many of her important works during this time and founded the Hartford Female Seminary in 1823, a forum to disseminate her ideas on domestic and physical education. In her works, which included *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, for the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School* (1841), *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* (1855) and *Calisthenic Exercises, for Schools, Families, and Health Establishments* (1856), Beecher set the tone for the discussion on the debilitating affect of city life on women's health. As historian Kathryn Kish Sklar, Catharine Beecher's biographer, wrote: 'The urban environment impaired the health of men and women alike, Catharine said.' Yet especially for women, in her comments on city life, Beecher perceived 'health as precarious' and demonstrated 'the ubiquity of the image that linked women with infirmity in the middle decades of the nineteenth century'. [4]

Ante-bellum health reformers tended to idealize farm life and maintained that farm women embodied perfect health. Everywhere they looked in the burgeoning north-eastern cities, in contrast to the countryside, white middle-class Protestant social reformers witnessed an alarming degeneration of female health. In the activism of reformers seeking to improve the physical constitution of ante-bellum Americans, gender, social class, and rural-urban distinctions shaped the historical context of the health and sport movement. In her critique of the social, physical, and moral condition of American citizens, Beecher, and other like-minded New England social reformers, envisioned an ideal society based upon individual and collective robust health as the bastion of American culture. 'Health is the central luminary, of which all the stars that spangle the proud flag of our common country are but proud satellites,' proclaimed health champion Thomas Wentworth Higginson. [5]

In this campaign to save American society by combating the ill health of its citizenry and providing suitable sporting activities, Beecher, Higginson, and other health advisers such as Sylvester Graham, William Alcott and Mary Gove Nichols advocated a plan for self-help in health issues. They presented good hygiene as a moral obligation and bad hygiene and disease as evil; whether the obligation was to God, the race, the nation or self, failure to fulfil the laws of health constituted immorality. The gospel of health exemplified the religious zeal of ante-bellum reform activism. [6]

Social reformers responded to broad social changes in ante-bellum American society. In the north-eastern regions, America moved from a rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrial, modern society through the application of science and technology. Economic growth created a new cultural scene confronting ante-bellum reformers. The number of people engaged in agriculture began to decline, while the number of people engaged in commerce and manufacturing in new urban centres rose. Changing cultural conditions in the urban environment generated problems ante-bellum reformers sought to solve. In contrast to the countryside, ante-bellum urban health reformers regarded the cities as unhealthy, dangerous and in need of reform crusades. [7]

A sense of urgency pervaded the gospel of health as preached by American body and health reformers. Ante-bellum urbanites especially needed to heed 'the laws of health and happiness' in the rhetoric infused with religious fervour and a perfectionist creed. For like-minded American reformers, 'gloom and optimism were contemporary sides of a widespread concern for health during the mid-nineteenth century as many Americans became anxious about their physical well-being', historian Martha Verbrugge has stated. [8] The physical, mental, and moral well-being of nineteenth-century American urban women definitely required serious consideration. In Beecher's worst-case scenario of 'sickness and sufferings', [9] a frail woman failed to fulfil the urban, gender-based ideal of womanhood – 'the cult of domesticity' – performing her reproductive and socializing roles. [10]

Proponents of the health and sport movement to improve Americans' physical fitness determined that the poor habits of urban men and women led to their lack of physical vigour. Whether because of their horrible eating practices leading to 'dyspepsia' or their lack of outdoor invigorating exercise, city folks needed to pursue the type of activities they believed farm folks of the past practised. Higginson remarked about women: 'There is in New England no agricultural labour in which women can be said to be habitually engaged. Most persons never saw an American woman making hay'; and 'Dolly the Dairy-Maid is becoming to our children as purely ideal a being as Cinderella'. [11] In the nineteenth century, images recurred of the healthy farm family partaking of natural fresh air and consuming the wholesome food of the farmer's table prepared by the sprightly farm wife. [12] Yet urbanites alone did not succumb to dyspepsia. A farm journalist in *The Plow: A Monthly Journal of Rural Affairs* even asked 'Who Has Got The Dyspepsia?' and added: 'Don't all speak at once. We know most of you have got it.' [13]

In their urban boosterism touting the technological, commercial and sporting advantages of the city, journalists criticized farm life as inferior to modern city life. Farm journalists vigorously responded by expressing their disdain for the corruptions and wealthy trappings of the city that lured farm youth and jeopardized their moral and physical health. The farm press constructed positive images of rural women's health—for example, the *Massachusetts Ploughman* journalist who portrayed the farmer's daughter with 'the glow of health upon her cheek'. [14] Agricultural historian Paul Johnstone explained that the superior virtues of rural life praised in the popular press by farm journalists served as 'a defensive gesture against real or imagined slurs'. [15]

In particular, the home-leaving of farm daughters especially alarmed reporters of New England agriculture, and the farm press emphasized the well-being of daughters as a factor in rural depopulation. Many rural daughters welcomed the chance to leave the farm and fatiguing domestic work and instead gain access to middle-class urban cultural experiences. The agricultural press pondered concerns about daughters quitting the farmstead at length and reported that common farmers defending their agricultural way of life wanted young women to remain on the homestead. But many young women wanted to escape the countryside. Rural women giving advice in the farm journals tended to side with farm girls who portrayed the health-depleting tasks of their life on the farm, in contrast to the image of farm daughters' vim and vigour endorsed by farm men. A woman correspondent for the *American Agriculturist* in 1846, writing about farm daughters, advocated that these girls 'need reforming mentally and physically'. [16] Yet in the debate on the physical condition of farm daughters, both farmers wanting to maintain the status quo and progressive farm men and journal editors criticized the rising expectations of farm girls seeking cultural options, and better physical health and physical recreation, away from their domestic labours.

Ante-bellum New England rural health reformers articulated the link between physical exercise in the open air and the betterment of rural woman's physical vigour. Under the heading 'Physical Recreation' in the 1852 *New England Farmer*, a journalist professed: 'It is quite a mistake to consider the labor of the day as equivalent to exercise'. He believed that 'Athletic sports and out of door exercises, of every description, are no less conducive to the morals, and happiness, than they are necessary to the perfect health of the young of *both* sexes'. [17]

Sport and physical recreation for rural women went hand in hand with physical health within a gender context. The active physical recreations prescribed for rural women in everyday life commonly shared a non-competitive element and usually occurred in close proximity to the farmstead in nature outdoors. Time away from the farmstead for sport or leisure typically belonged to the male gender; men exercised their prerogative to secure a period for non-work activities. Women discerned men's power to secure recreation during their work routine and agitated for healthful and pleasant physical pursuits for themselves. The granddaughter of Henry and Bethia Bullard, who visited the Bullard farm in Massachusetts as a young girl, realized the

gender differences in the quest for recreation. In Bertha's own words, 'I always thought grandfather had the best end of it', as at times 'he spent the day in Framingham or Boston, and did not have the monotonous life that the women of the family had'. [18] Some physical amusements on the farm proved practical as well as healthful for women such as gardening or swimming, and in other sports women and girls participated in familial recreation.

Rural Women, Outdoor Physical Activities and Reforming Health

To compensate for farm women's health-depleting indoor chores and their constant breathing of unventilated and foul air, out-of-doors physical recreations and sporting pursuits especially afforded health-building advantages for them. Agricultural journalists urged farm women to enjoy salubrious air when partaking of diversions from their domestic cares. In the *American Agriculturist*, J.A. Nash, a champion of women's outdoor healthful pursuits, urged that rural women's 'sphere should extend somewhat outside of lath and plaster. 'Mothers, go out; take your daughters along with you ... [and] explore the terra incognita of the whole farm.' [19] To enhance woman's fitness 'the glorious sunlight must lend its aid in deepening the glow of health, and stimulating all the functions of the frame'. In other words, 'Would not a few hours daily habitual exercise in the open air, give that healthy stimulus and vigor needed in performing all their in-door labors?' [20] as a *Homestead* contributor suggested. By walking, horseback riding, gardening and engaging in physical recreation, the farm woman could renovate her health and offset the health-depleting aspects of constant physical toil in the farmhouse and surrounding farm spaces.

Farm women themselves claimed that wearing the proper dress in outdoor recreation, as well as sturdy shoes, increased the healthfulness of their physical exercise. Some farm women advocated their right to wear the new 'bloomer' costume, a shorter walking dress, to improve their health and participate in outdoor exercise. The bloomer costume, as with the physical exercise and sporting pursuits of farm women, has received scant historical attention, with most sport and health historians focusing on urban women and the urban health reform movement. The kind of costume women wanted to wear outdoors on their excursions generated a gender debate about women's health, physical emancipation and power in farm life. Several farm women offered an endorsement of 'bloomers', the new costume promoted by women's rights advocates in the 1850s, representing a powerful symbol of their challenge to male authority. [21]

Women and men reformers alike championed outdoor pastimes for rejuvenating rural women's physical vigour. Rural advice-givers rendered their diagnosis of the ailments related to women's indoor work burdens in the farmhouse. In the *Massachusetts Ploughman* in 1846, the article 'Laboring Too Much' focused particularly on rural women. 'Females, in New England, are worse off than the other sex in out-of-door relaxation' and consequently 'they make feeble mothers—look thin, sallow, lank, and die by thousands, prematurely, of diseases' from their

inadequacy 'to breathe the fresh air of heaven'. [22] Worried about how very little fresh air farm women breathed, a journalist in *The Homestead* linked the early 'fading of beauty among our women' to their 'keeping too much within doors' [23] In the *American Agriculturist* in 1856, J.A. Nash of Amherst, Massachusetts, scrutinized the notion of the buxom farm woman versus the weak urban woman in health-reform rhetoric. Dispelling the image of the vibrant, healthy countrywoman, he asserted that city women actually spent *more* time in the fresh air than country women because, 'In cities and large villages, they shop and spin street – yarn; see, and are seen of men; and seem to have an existence to be a part and parcel of mankind; but not so in our rural districts.' Nash even detected a declining standard of rural women's health; it used to be if a man wanted 'a good, substantial, sensible wife, he must look to the country. But the tables are turning. It is fast coming about,' he declared, that if 'a farmer's son should take a fancy to double the team ... he will have to look to the city. We congratulate the city misses; but alas, for the country girls!' In sum, 'The trouble is, our women are prisoners'; and Nash deemed them 'none the less pale for that'. [24]

Rural commentators advocating improvements in farm women's physical health documented the dismal results of constant domestic labour confining women indoors and magnifying their hardships. The immense amount of time spent inside the farm dwelling to fulfil tasks by women prompted a *Homestead* reporter in 1858 to state that 'there is a want among us of out-door exhilarating, inspiring, muscle making exercise for women'. Because women lacked 'vigorous action by free exercise in the open air', the 'cheek pales, and the eye loses its lustre'. [25] Moreover, the farm environs, when they smelled of horrible bad air, slops and waste near the farmhouse, added to the health complaints of farm women. The quest for pure air in farm life usually spotlighted the woman's pursuit of time separate from her arduous farm duties (see Figure 1). After all, farm men typically spent their day outdoors in nature's air, usually away from the places of household odour and kitchen refuse. However, farm women spent long hours at indoor tasks and remained shut up working in the farmhouse, restricting their opportunity to partake of the same outdoor pure air. Recognizing the gender dimensions of the fresh-air situation, a farm wife asserted that 'it was the height of folly for a *farmer's wife* to think of rambling in the woods for flowers, and that it was perfectly useless to inhale the air ... unless she ran out in a great hurry to see what was the matter with the chickens, or to look up eggs for some purpose of cookery'. [26] Likewise, Nash explained that indoor employments contributed to 'why our women are the frailest *physically* of all Eve's daughters'. Women's domestic duties 'imprisoned them, blanched them, unnerved them, unmusclled them'. Nash concluded: 'Where are the woman's rights folks?' [27] Rural women and health commentators advocated a woman's right to fresh air and wholesome physical recreation.

Women and men reformers alike championed outdoor pastimes for rejuvenating countrywomen's physical vigour. Lavinia K. Davis, New England correspondent for the United States Department of Agriculture Reports, persuasively argued the issue. Davis stated that women's premature decay was 'aggravated and made deadly by our