



ROUTLEDGE

American Sports

From the Age of Folk Games to
the Age of the Internet

EIGHTH EDITION

PAMELA C. GRUNDY and BENJAMIN G. RADER

American Sports

American Sports, now in its 8th edition, is a comprehensive, analytical introduction to the history of American sports from the colonial era to the present. Pamela Grundy and Benjamin Rader outline the complex relationships between sports and class, gender, race, religion, and region in the United States. Building on changes in the previous edition, which expanded the attention paid to women, African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos, this edition adds numerous sidebars that examine subjects such as the Black Sox scandal, the worldwide influence of Jack Johnson, the significance of softball for lesbian athletes, and the influence of the point spread on sports gambling. Insightful, thorough, and highly readable, the new edition of *American Sports* remains the finest available introduction to the myriad ways in which sports have reinforced or challenged the values and behaviors of Americans as well as the structure of American society.

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Eighth Edition

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Pamela C. Grundy

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PREFACE

In more than three decades of existence, *American Sports* has grown and developed along with the field of sports history that it seeks to encapsulate. It is a pleasure to offer this 8th edition. The 7th edition involved the first major overhaul of the text in many years. That rewrite focused on recasting parts of the narrative in order to more fully integrate new, rich scholarship on athletes and communities from the margins of mainstream athletic culture, especially African Americans, Native Americans, women, and Latinos. This edition augments that narrative through a series of sidebars that seek to clarify key issues and offer insights into subjects such as the meanings in a game's rules, the worldwide impact of Jack Johnson, the enduring fascination with the Black Sox scandal, and the significance of softball for American lesbians and their communities.

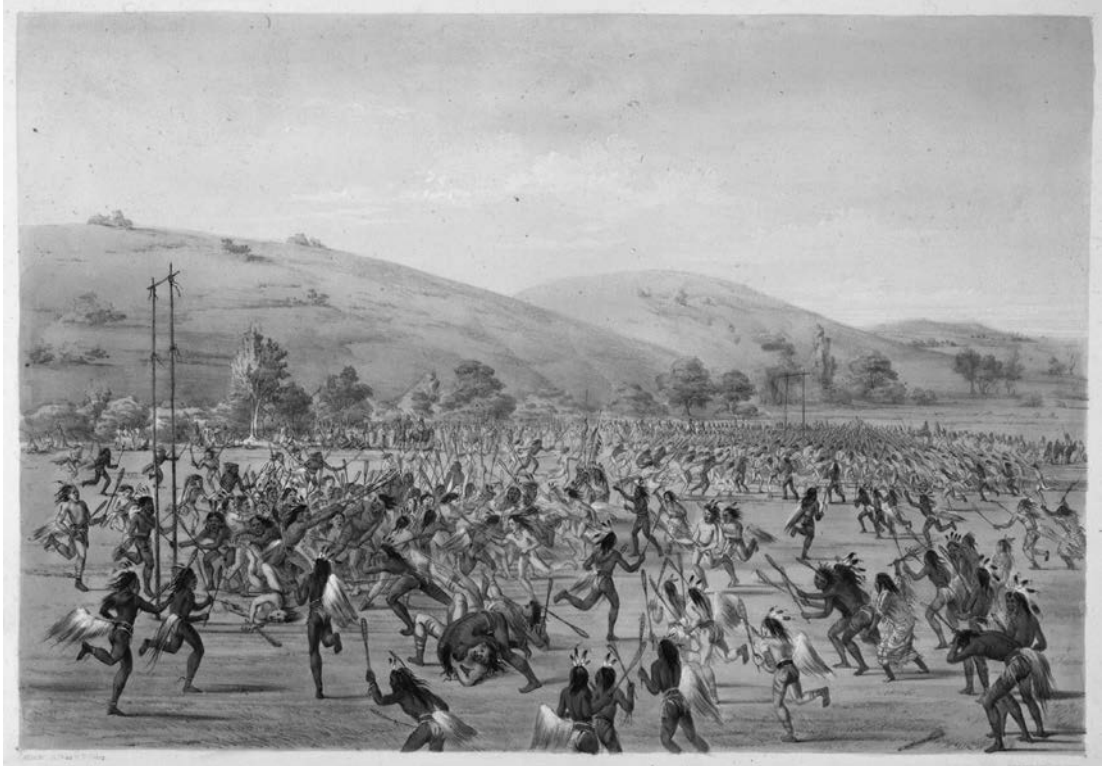
Sports continues to offer a profoundly illuminating lens through which to view U.S. history and culture—one that grows in value as sports history literature expands. While sports has definite limits as a metaphor for American society, or for any other non-sporting endeavor, we are constantly astonished by the insights it can offer into issues such as gender, race, class, sexuality, family, nationalism, religion, political processes, grassroots activism, community identity, and democracy. It can be disconcerting to explore the ways that social and cultural dilemmas affect a realm so many people view as a pleasurable escape from the thorny challenges of daily life. But few arenas of American society have so much to teach. We hope this latest version of *American Sports* will help a new generation of students see the value in a careful, critical examination of our nation's sporting history, and will encourage them to pursue further work in this area.

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CHAPTER 1

Sports in Early America



Choctaw athletes competing in a centuries-old Native American ball game, as depicted by artist George Catlin in the 1840s.

George Catlin, *Ball-Play of the Choctaw—Ball-Up*. Oil on canvas, 1846–1850.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1.1 Discuss the different functions that sports served in Native American, European, and African cultures as well as the forces that shaped the sporting cultures that emerged in the early American Republic.</p> <p>1.2 Explain how the ball games played by natives of North America and Mesoamerica reflected the worldviews of their participants.</p> <p>1.3 Outline the components of European “festive culture” and the role they played in European societies.</p> | <p>1.4 Describe the aspects of European and African cultures that migrants attempted to reproduce in the Americas, along with the functions they served.</p> <p>1.5 Summarize the characteristics of New England’s “lawful sport,” and explain how and why “lawful sport” differed from other forms of sport practiced in the Americas in the colonial era.</p> <p>1.6 Articulate the ways that religious and political ideas impeded the development of sport in the early years of the American Republic.</p> |
|---|--|

In September of 1889, at a spot high in the Appalachian Mountains, two groups of Cherokee Indians squared off against each other in a ball game. At the appointed time, young men representing the rival communities of Wolf Town and Big Cove lined up face-to-face, wielding elaborately carved ball sticks and wearing eagle feathers tightly bound into their hair. Hundreds of spectators ringed the ball ground, which ran beside a river and was marked at either end with a pair of upright poles that served as goals. To one side lay closely guarded piles of the goods that players and spectators had wagered on their teams. As the players eyed each other, an elder urged them to play with honor, and to keep their composure when faced with injuries or setbacks. Then he tossed out the ball, and the players exploded into action.

“Instantly twenty pairs of ball sticks clatter together in the air, as their owners spring to catch the ball in its descent,” anthropologist James Mooney wrote in an appropriately breathless account of the contest.

In the scramble it usually happens that the ball falls to the ground, when it is picked up by one more active than the rest. Frequently, however, a man will succeed in catching it between his ball sticks as it falls, and, disengaging himself from the rest, starts to run with it to the goal; but before he has gone a dozen yards they are upon him, and the whole crowd goes down together, rolling and tumbling over each other in the dust, straining and tugging for possession of the ball, until one of the players manages to extricate himself from the struggling heap and starts off with the ball. At once the others spring to their feet and, throwing away their ball sticks, run to intercept him or to prevent his capture, their black hair streaming out behind and their naked bodies glistening in the sun as they run. The scene is constantly changing. Now the players are all together at the lower end of the field, when suddenly, with a powerful throw, a player sends the ball high over the heads of the spectators and into the bushes beyond. Before there is time to realize it, here they come with a grand sweep and a burst of short, sharp Cherokee exclaima-

tions, charging right into the crowd, knocking men and women to right and left and stumbling over dogs and babies in their frantic efforts to get at the ball.¹

The centuries-old Native American ball game, which the Cherokee called “anetso” and French missionaries gave the name “la crosse,” touched on many aspects of Cherokee culture. The strength, speed, agility, and daring that the participants displayed were the same qualities required in hunting and warfare. The excitement of competition, as well as the elaborate ceremonies that preceded the games, drew communities together. The game was also intimately intertwined with Cherokee religion. Cherokee legends told of games played by animals and gods. Players prepared for a match both physically and spiritually, with the help of a conjurer who guided them through time-honored rituals and called on powerful spirits to assist them in the game. As a result, the games became far more than exciting distractions from everyday affairs; they also served as powerful affirmations of community, identity, and worldview.

Outside Cherokee lands, in the burgeoning cities that increasingly marked the North American landscape, a very different kind of game held sway. Like anetso, “base ball” was played with balls and sticks. It too was an exciting game that displayed strength, speed, and daring and drew communities together. But it was only a few decades old. Its rules had been shaped not by centuries of play, but by an official committee charged with standardizing the game. Most of the fans who flocked to the newly built ballparks had migrated to the city from the countryside, or immigrated from abroad, and they often had little to connect them besides their support for the local team. Perhaps most significant, at its top levels baseball had become a commercial enterprise, much like the countless other business endeavors that were rapidly turning the United States into one of the world’s most industrialized nations. The ballparks to which urban dwellers so eagerly flocked had been built in anticipation of profits from ticket sales. The newspapers that published enthusiastic accounts of the games sought to draw readers and increase circulation. The players, most of whom had roots in Europe or Africa as well as North America, were professionals, tied to their teams not by kinship or community, but by salaries and contracts.

The new game spoke to the changes that had transformed the North American continent since the arrival of European explorers set off a massive, worldwide migration that left few corners of the globe untouched. Starting in the 1500s, a flood of Europeans and Africans—the latter generally brought against their will—overwhelmed the native populations of North and South America as well as the islands that ringed the Caribbean Sea. Propelled by the imperatives of commerce and Christianity, the new arrivals established colonial societies across the continents. In the temperate southern regions, colonialism was fueled by the profits from large-scale agriculture—sugarcane in the Caribbean and South America; cattle ranching in South America and Mexico; and cotton, rice, and tobacco in the southernmost colonies of North America. Further north, colonists established family farms and a small-scale manufacturing sector that would eventually help spark the Industrial Revolution.

As the inhabitants of these new worlds built new societies, they also shaped new sports, drawing on the circumstances in which they found themselves as well as on their rich range of sporting traditions. Considering the sporting traditions on which inhabitants of the future United States drew, as well as the processes by which they shaped their games, helps illustrate some of the many ways that sports can be linked to culture as well as the broad range of cultures that contributed to the sports we know today.

The North American Ball Game

While natives of eastern North America enjoyed many different kinds of games and competitions, none held as much significance as the ball game. The game, played from Huron and Iroquois territory in the north to Creek and Choctaw lands in the south, varied from community to community, depending on tradition and circumstances. Players might wield one stick or two, teams might have fewer than a dozen members or more than a hundred, ball fields could vary from 300 yards to half a mile in length. But no matter what the rules, young men—and sometimes young women—grew up carving sticks, tossing balls, and dreaming of someday representing their communities. Stories of the game were woven throughout Native American legends: telling, for example, of the day a powerful spirit presented the Fox people with a stick and a buckskin ball and taught them how to play, or of the time that kindness to a bat and a flying squirrel helped the creatures of the air win a game from the creatures of the earth.

Ball games often took place at times of spiritual significance, such as the end of harvest, and were frequently held to honor or solicit the deities who had taught humans how to play. They were accompanied by elaborate rituals. Among the Cherokee, for example, preparations for a game began weeks in advance. Players linked themselves with speed, flight, and keen vision by weaving bat wings through their sticks and gathering eagle feathers to tie into their hair. Community members began to gather goods for wagers and plan the ceremonies that would precede the event. These preparations reached a peak the night before the game, when each town took part in an all-night dance, and the players embarked on a 24-hour fast. With fires burning, musicians playing, and babies sleeping in the bushes, men, women, and children danced and chanted. During the dance, and again the next morning, each team made several ceremonial journeys to a nearby river, where the conjurers performed their final rituals.

Most ball games were played between individual communities, which often nurtured longtime rivalries. But because of their close connections with natural and spiritual forces, games were also linked to larger events. Games could be used to formally mend relationships or settle disputes among feuding communities. Like ritual dances, they could also be employed in efforts to influence the weather, or help heal the sick. In the fall of 1636, for example, Huron communities living around Lake Huron were ravaged by influenza, one of the many deadly diseases that Europeans brought to the New World. French Jesuit missionaries reported that one renowned Huron conjurer “had declared that the whole country was sick; and he had prescribed a remedy, namely, a game of crosse, for its recovery. This order had been published throughout all the villages, the Captains had set about having it executed, and the young people had not spared their arms.”²

The Mesoamerican Ball Game

Further to the south, in areas that would become known as Mexico and South America, traditional games and entertainments included yet another kind of ball play. In a tradition thousands of years old, athletes of the Aztec, Mayan, and other Mesoamerican empires competed on specially built courts, striving to send a heavy rubber ball through a stone ring. As with other traditional games, rules varied from community to community, but players were generally forbidden to use their hands, feet, or head, and instead propelled the ball

with their hips, thighs, and shoulders. The largest and wealthiest empires had created elaborate, urbanized societies, and these cultures gave rise to highly skilled corps of specialized athletes, who performed for royalty and other elites. These players could compete for hours without allowing the ball to touch the ground. The game required tremendous strength and ability, and idealized images of strong, young ballplayers appeared throughout Mesoamerican art, indicating the high regard in which these athletes were held.³

The Mesoamerican game was also closely tied to Mesoamerican religion. Ball games frequently appeared in legends: most notably in Mayan accounts of a pair of gods known as the Hero Twins. According to the legend, the Twins descended into the underworld, rescued the Lord of Corn by defeating the Lord of Death in a ball game, and then ascended to the sky. Mesoamerican religious beliefs cast the world as an ongoing struggle between the opposites of day and night, good and evil, and life and death—a contest neatly encapsulated by competition between two groups of ballplayers. This link between the games and the balance of cosmic forces could make the stakes for ball games especially high. Mesoamerican beliefs held that human sacrifices played a key role in keeping the gods happy and the cosmos in balance. As a result, players who lost a game might also lose their lives.

European Sporting Traditions

The Europeans who arrived in the Americas carried their own sporting traditions. European Christianity drew sharp distinctions between material and spiritual worlds, and European sports bore little religious significance. Many traditional games and entertainments had in fact emerged from the continent's pre-Christian era and were often frowned upon by Christian authorities. But sports and games played important roles in European societies, and many colonial-era migrants sought to reproduce European traditions in their new settings.

One function sports served in Europe was to distinguish the upper from the lower classes. Sports that required costly investments in land or animals became ways for elites to cement bonds among themselves and display their superior wealth and abilities to commoners, who were frequently prohibited from engaging in such exalted activities. In England, the limited forest land belonged to the landed gentry, and hunting stags or foxes was a favorite sport of kings and noblemen (common Englishmen rarely had the chance to hunt, and those who journeyed to the colonies generally had to learn hunting skills from Native Americans). Horse racing, another elite pursuit, took place at specially built tracks attended exclusively by wealthy patrons. In Spain, where many families earned their wealth from cattle raising, the well-to-do were also avid hunters, and public festivities frequently centered on the display of upper-class horsemanship (the Spanish word for “gentleman,” *caballero*, translates literally as “horseman”). As part of these events, which often took place in a town's public square, elaborately garbed noblemen engaged in cattle-roping exhibitions, in mounted mock combat, and in bullfights—the original bullfighters were noblemen who fought on horseback.⁴

European commoners, on the other hand, pursued their sporting activities as part of what historian Richard Holt has termed a “festive culture” that prevailed across Europe during the medieval era.⁵ This culture underscored the social bonds that organized communal life, and offered participants a brief means of escape from the hard work that dominated their daily activities. European villagers invariably concluded their harvest season

with a festival of thanks accompanied by hearty eating, drinking, dancing, and game playing. In addition, the Christian calendar offered numerous opportunities for communities to stop work in order to honor patron saints, celebrate major events in the life of Christ, and commemorate numerous other saints and martyrs. Some of these festivals were organized by nobles as exhibitions of their wealth and power, but many others, such as Maypole festivities and the exchange of eggs at Easter, were arranged by villagers themselves, and incorporated elements of Europe's pre-Christian past.

Folk games formed an integral part of these festivities. In Britain, many parishes enjoyed stoolball, foot races, quoits (in which a contestant attempted to throw an iron ring over a peg), and skittles or ninepins (both forms of bowling). Versions of bowling were also popular in Germany and Holland, and the Dutch were especially fond of a club-and-ball game they called "colf." Games played into the flirtatious atmosphere that so often infused community celebrations, furnishing young men with opportunities to display their physiques and skills to marriageable young women. In some places, games such as foot races served a similar purpose for women. "Nothing is more usual than for a nimble-footed wench to get a husband at the same time as she wins a smock," observed Joseph Addison about one British festival in the early eighteenth century.⁶

Games and spectacles were often violent, affirming a masculine ethos of individual prowess and physical courage. Britons especially relished wrestling and cudgeling. In cudgeling, the combatants employed wicker shields for protection, while using a long stick to "break the head" or draw blood from opponents. The ancient "blood sport" of cockfighting—where roosters armed with metal spurs fought to the death—was practiced throughout Europe, and excited spectators usually wagered on the outcome. In many parts of Spain, commoners arranged their own bullfights (without horses), and Britons avidly engaged in bullbaiting, in which a group of dogs attempted to immobilize a tethered bull. Admiration for the characteristics of "bulldogs" eventually transformed them into a national symbol of Britain's tenacity.

European villagers also reveled in a game known as "football." Unlike modern soccer, rugby, or American football, all of which sprang from the medieval game, the village sport had no common rules. Some games were ad hoc affairs with an unspecified number of players. Others were regularly scheduled contests between rival villages. Depending upon local customs, the game might emphasize kicking, running, or throwing the ball. The football, which was normally an inflated animal bladder, was sometimes encased in leather. The ostensible purpose of the game was to move the ball across a previously defined goal line.

In some places, the game had sophisticated rules and strategies for deceiving the opposition. In Cornwall, for example, custom required that each player pair off with another, attempting to block his opponent's advance. This feature, along with an offside rule, made it similar to modern American football. On the other hand, in many places football seems to have been little more than an unregulated brawl. The players kicked, wrestled, and sometimes struck their opponents with their fists. Damaged property, torn clothing, bloodied bodies, and sometimes death accompanied these contests. Citing football's contribution to social disorder, English monarchs and local magistrates banned the game on at least 30 separate occasions between 1314 and 1617. None of these measures permanently impeded the game's popularity.

Games and revelries helped satisfy particular needs of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europeans. Festivities relieved some of the grimness of life, which routinely included early death from disease and famine (the day-to-day struggles of ordinary life

were one reason many Europeans were willing to take the risk of emigrating to the Americas). They frequently provided a setting for courtship rituals. They could offer a symbolic and thereby safe expression of resentments arising from the inequalities in the social structure. Young men frequently engaged in a pageant of “misrule” that included public mockery of social superiors, married men, the church, and even the monarch. Games such as football also helped to promote village unity. “At the seasons of football and cockfighting,” according to a 1712 writer, many parishes “reassume their . . . hatred of each other. My tenant in the country is verily persuaded that the parish of the enemy hath not one honest man in it.”⁷ Versions of these European sporting traditions became common features of colonial life throughout the Americas.

European Sport in the Americas

When Europeans arrived in the Americas, they frequently sought to replace native festivals and celebrations with their own. The Spanish, for example, banned all the events associated with Mesoamerican religion, including the ball game, and instituted their own calendar of Catholic holidays. As landowners and merchants grew wealthy from the resources of their newly acquired land, they sponsored elaborate celebrations of Christian saints, feast days, and important government events, complete with music, fireworks, games, and dancing. As in Spain, they emphasized their status and power through lavish public displays, which featured elaborate costumes and exhibitions of horsemanship. They imported Spanish bulls and fighting cocks, and built bull rings and cockpits.

One particularly popular event in Mexico was the *corrida*—a day-long festival that featured the horsemanship that had been so important in Spain. At first, as in Spain, the horse events were limited to the elite, and both natives and *mestizos* (people of mixed Spanish–native heritage) were forbidden to take part. But as time went on, most large landowners relocated to the cities, and *mestizos* took over both ranching duties and the *corridas*. The *corridas* took on a more indigenous character; organizers included more local games and dances, and turned events that honored Catholic saints and holy days into celebrations of indigenous deities as well. *Mestizos* developed their own distinctive style of riding, and added new, often more dangerous events such as subduing wild bulls, riding wild horses, and bringing down animals with elaborate roping techniques. These new horsemen became known as *charros*, and their sporting activities as *charrería*. *Charros* and their skills gained new status in the early 1800s, when they played central roles in Mexico’s war for independence. In 1821, when the Spaniards withdrew from the country, *charros* became national icons, and *charrería* became the official Mexican sport. In the mid-1800s, when the United States extended its reach into Texas and California, *charrería* became an American sport as well, eventually giving rise to the modern-day rodeo.⁸

Sport in the Southern British Colonies

A similar transformation took place in the southern British colonies, driven by a powerful landed gentry that had arisen from generous royal land grants worked by indentured servants as well as by growing numbers of imported Africans (British planters initially sought to enslave Native Americans, but with limited success). Southern planters did their best

to emulate the lifestyle of the English country gentry. They built splendid mansions that often included special rooms for dancing and billiard playing; they ate with silver decorated with the family's coat of arms. They frequently sent their sons to England to acquire the culture, tastes, and skills of "gentlemen"—an education that often included athletics. When a young William Byrd II returned home to Virginia, he enthusiastically played all the games that he had encountered in the mother country, including billiards, bowls, ninepins, skittles, and even a version of cricket.

As in Britain, the southern gentry used sports as a mark of social status. In colonial Virginia, only the gentry could legally hunt deer. Southern elites also organized fox hunts, and when the indigenous grey foxes proved overly elusive, they imported red foxes from England. Horse racing was another elite preserve, as dramatically illustrated in the much cited case of Virginia tailor James Bullocke. In 1674, Bullocke entered his mare in a race against a horse owned by Dr. Matthew Slader, with 2,000 pounds of tobacco at stake. For such presumption, the county court fined Bullocke 200 pounds of tobacco and asserted that horse racing was "a sport for gentlemen only."⁹

No pastime ignited the passions of the southern gentry more than horse racing. Racing began as a largely impromptu affair, in which young planters would challenge one another to a race on Saturday afternoons, on court days, or after Sunday church services. Bets would be placed, the owners would mount, a gun would be fired, and the horses would sprint down a quarter-mile dirt track. "If you happened to be looking the other way," Thomas Anburey wrote, "the race is terminated before you can turn your head."¹⁰ Virginians bred a particularly wiry animal with powerful hindquarters, known as the quarter horse, for this kind of race.

In the last half of the eighteenth century, however, the great planters had turned from the quarter horse to the English thoroughbred. Thoroughbred racing tested "bottom," the ability to race more than a mile or several miles. In contrast to their English counterparts, the colonial gentry encouraged thoroughbred racing as a public spectacle. In England, straightaway courses permitted exciting perspectives only in the vicinity of the finish line, and only the upper strata attended the races. But the colonial gentry raced their horses on mile-long oval tracks, which afforded a good view to all, and men of all ranks attended the races. Horse owners formed jockey clubs in Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina, which built fenced tracks and charged for admission. The clubs kept careful records of bloodlines, and races and racers began to don colorful apparel that separated them from one another.

As racing became more organized, so did the training of horses and jockeys. Much of this work fell to slaves of African descent. Africans had brought their own sports with them across the ocean. Like Native Americans, most of the Africans brought to the Americas came from traditional societies where sports and religion were closely intermixed. Africans from the ancient kingdom of Angola, for example, practiced a dance-like martial art known as *engolo* that centered on kicks and acrobatics and was tied to traditional spiritual beliefs. Their descendants would engage in the sport for generations, calling it "knocking and kicking" in the American South, *danmyé* in French Martinique, and *jogo de capieira* in Brazil, where it would eventually become an integral part of Brazilian culture. But like many of the traditions that enslaved Africans carried to North America, especially those with spiritual significance, sports such as *engolo* were practiced largely in secret, along with traditional forms of dancing, singing, and drumming that helped participants to maintain independent identities and community cohesion despite the assaults of slavery.¹¹

Still, as the rise of black jockeys indicated, Africans and their descendants also adapted to the demands of their new situations. One early star was Austin Curtis, who

formed a particularly strong relationship with his iconoclastic owner, North Carolina planter Willie Jones. Working together, they developed a renowned group of race horses that made Jones the most successful stable owner and Curtis the most famous jockey in the South. In 1891, Jones freed Curtis and made him a partner in the stable. Such a show of respect, however, was rare. More often, the planters' lavish displays of games and gambling were directed toward reinforcing their dominance over southern society.¹²

Southern Festivals

As in Spanish America, festivals became key parts of life in the southern colonies. The Hanover County Fair in Virginia, established in 1737, included a great feast accompanied by the music of drums, trumpets, and oboes. The fair sponsored contests with various prizes: five pounds for a horse race, a hat for a cudgeling match, a violin for a fiddling contest, a pair of silver buckles for a wrestling match, and "a pair of handsome silk stockings . . . [to] be given to the handsomest young country maid that appears in the field."¹³ Festival pursuits also included blood sports. Gander pulling was a favorite. Usually staged on Easter Monday, a day of boisterous celebration in the Chesapeake Bay region, the neck of a goose was liberally greased, and the hapless animal was hung by its feet from a rope stretched between two trees or tied to a tree limb. The contestants mounted their horses and galloped by at full speed, while they attempted to jerk the goose's head off. The winner got the blood-soaked goose for his supper.

Men of both high and low status frequented the cockpits. One traveler's account described a cockpit as "surrounded by many genteel people, promiscuously mingled with the vulgar and the debased. Exceedingly beautiful cocks were produced, armed with long, sharp, steel-pointed gaffs." Men placed their bets. The cocks then went at each other furiously, "not the least disconcerted by the crowd or the shouting." Even after having been pierced repeatedly by the gaffs, the cocks continued to fight as long as they were able to crawl. After the middle of the eighteenth century, cockfighting increasingly came under the patronage of the gentry. Newspapers began to announce the greater matches, many of which were scheduled on major holidays.¹⁴

Tensions in New England

Such traditional European pastimes, however, found far less favor in the New England colonies, where the dominant Puritans frowned on what they viewed as idle or sinful recreation. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, even before the first permanent British settlements in North America, Puritan reformers made recreation a focus of controversy in Britain. They campaigned to extend the Church of England's break with the Roman Catholic Church by wiping out all remnants of the holy days, rituals, pageantry, and symbols associated with Catholicism. They were especially enraged by Sunday merriments, and in the early years of the seventeenth century mounted campaigns throughout England to suppress public recreation on the Sabbath.

In the New World, where Puritans sought to build a society free from the worldly absorptions of the country they had left behind, recreation became one focus of conflict. On Christmas Day in 1621, for example, William Bradford, the doughty governor of the

tiny Plymouth colony, called his able-bodied men to work just before dawn. Bradford's summons came as no surprise to most of the settlers, who joined Bradford in rejecting the idea of Christmas as a holiday. Yet a few recent arrivals from England objected to Bradford's order. Their consciences, they informed the governor, forbade them from toiling on Christmas Day. Bradford disagreed with the newcomers, but as daylight hours were precious he decided to wait until later to convince them of their errors. He departed with the remaining men to take up the work at hand.

When Bradford, along with his workmen, returned at noon, he found that the new arrivals were shouting, laughing, and running about in Plymouth's single street "openly at play." As he later wrote, "Some were pitching the bar, and some [were playing] at stool-ball."¹⁵ Bradford was furious. He seized the players' "implements" and ordered them off the street. Just as work on Christmas Day violated the newcomers' consciences, he proclaimed, merrymaking on Christ's birthday violated the conscience of the governor. This conflict continued. In 1640, for example, Massachusetts levied a fine upon anyone who fasted, feasted, or refused to work on Christmas Day. Quakers, another group of Protestant reformers whose zeal at times outstripped that of the Puritans, adopted similar laws in Pennsylvania.

The New England colonies established an unusually stern Sabbath. Beginning on Saturday night and ending at sundown on Sunday, the colonies forbade work, recreation, travel, idle conversation, sexual intercourse, and even "unnecessary and unreasonable walking in the streets and fields." In 1656, a Captain Kemble of Boston had to sit in the stocks for two hours for "lewd and unseemly conduct." After having been at sea for three years, the indiscreet captain had publicly kissed his wife on the Sabbath. Even as late as the 1730s, when stringent control of personal behavior had been noticeably relaxed in colonial Massachusetts, Joseph Bennett, an English traveler, observed that in Boston the Lord's Day was the "strictest kept that ever I yet saw anywhere."¹⁶ The Sabbatarian legislation of colonial America left an enduring legacy, one that was reinforced periodically by religious revivals. It was not until the 1930s, for example, that Pennsylvania dropped state bans on Sunday baseball games.

"Lawful Sport" in New England and the Middle Colonies

In both Old and New England, the Puritans objected more to the overall tenor of the festive culture than to the specific games associated with that culture. Indeed, the Puritans extended their approval to what Richard Baxter, a prominent divine, called *lawful sport or recreation*. To be lawful, a sport had to be dissociated from traditional revelries. Furthermore, a lawful sport should refresh the participants so that they could better execute their worldly and spiritual "callings" or duties. "We daily need some respite and diversion, without which we dull our powers; a little intermission sharpens 'em again," noted one minister. "Recreation," wrote another, "must tend also to glorify God . . . the scope and end of all recreation is, that God may be honored in and by them."¹⁷

To meet the standards of lawful pastimes required constant vigilance, an undeviating attention to the consequences of engaging in diversions. If a pastime became an all-absorbing activity, an end in itself without thought of one's higher duties, then one should stop engaging in it. If the sport stimulated the passions, entailed deceit, or resulted in idleness, gambling, excessive drinking, or sexual immorality, then it should also be avoided.

Puritans believed that all time was sacred; one's use of every moment was accountable to God. As a result, conscientious Puritans approached all forms of play with excruciating caution.

Consistent with their notions of lawful sport, seventeenth-century New England Puritans expressly condemned certain sports. They castigated animal baiting, fighting, and all games associated with gambling or immoderate drinking. Puritans viewed gambling as especially sinful; not only was it a form of idleness, it also mocked God, who controlled all things. The colonial assemblies specifically legislated against "unlawful games at cards, dice, etc." and fined innkeepers who permitted gambling of any kind. Horse racing became another target. In Ipswich, Connecticut, legislation mandated that anyone "convicted of running races upon horses . . . in the streets of Ipswich, or for abetting and encouraging others of laying wagers on any side should pay 40 shillings," an extraordinarily severe fine.¹⁸ Such legal strictures did not completely suppress racing; later in the eighteenth century, Boston newspapers even openly advertised races held outside the city's environs. Yet, unlike in the southern colonies, horse racing occupied at most a marginal place in New England's recreational life.

Young people were sometimes able to escape some of these strictures. Children played with toys and were allowed to swim in the summer and skate in the winter. Boys and young men also played football and bat-and-ball games, sometimes in defiance of official bans. Boston's selectmen prohibited football in 1657, after "several persons . . . received hurt by boys and young men playing at football in the streets." But the ban must not have been completely effective, for it was republished in 1677 and again in 1701. An English traveler, John Dutton, reported witnessing "a great game of football" between young men on a Massachusetts beach in 1685, but given the paucity of evidence for similar contests elsewhere, this game was probably unusual.¹⁹

The colony that became New York, which was originally settled by the Dutch and boasted an especially heterogeneous population, offered some recreational respite. Dutch settlers bowled, held boat races, and played "colf." Despite condemnation by local Puritans, the royal governor, his entourage, and prosperous merchants patronized other diversions. In 1664, the governor established the first organized horse races at the Newmarket course on Hempstead Plains, Long Island. In 1736, wealthy New York sportsmen built America's first circular racing track. Cockfighting and animal baiting also became common pastimes.

Farther south and west, the dominant Quakers specifically banned "all prizes, stage plays, cards, dice, may games, masques, revels, bull-baiting, cock-fighting, bear-baitings and the like." On the other hand, they specifically encouraged "useful" and "needful" recreation. Quaker schools set aside times for physical exercises, and both youngsters and adults swam in the summer and skated in the winter. Hunting and fishing, if engaged in for subsistence, also met with Quaker approval. William Penn, the colony's founder, summed up the Quaker attitude in an epigram. "The best recreation," he wrote, "is to do good."²⁰

Like the Puritans in New York, the Quakers encountered difficulties in enforcing their notions of lawful sport. In the eighteenth century, they had to contend with a huge influx of non-Quaker immigrants, including not only non-Quaker English but also Scots-Irish and Germans. Each ethnic group had its own recreational traditions. Furthermore, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the Quakers were losing political and cultural power to a new and more secular upper class. The new group had little or no sympathy with Penn's idea of a "Godly Commonwealth." Emulating counterparts in London, the local gentry in Philadelphia formed exclusive clubs such as the Mount Regal Fishing Club, the

Society of the Sons of St. Tammany, and the Hunting Club—and shared a rich associative life that revolved around leisure activities.²¹

Quaker and Puritan notions of lawful sport would persist long after the colonies declared their independence from England in 1776. Even those who had rejected Puritan or Quaker theology were products of its culture, and engagement in uninhibited play was

Tavern Pastimes

One institution important to sports in early America transcended region. Everywhere—South, North, and middle colonies—there were taverns, or what were sometimes called “inns” or “ordinaries.” Scattered a few miles apart along the colonial thoroughfares, one kind of tavern offered lodging and a respite to weary travelers. There, sojourners could find sleeping quarters (though they might have to share their bed with a stranger), food, drink, a stable for their horses, and possibly companionship and entertainment. Typical of colonial laws, a North Carolina statute required that roadside taverns provide “good wholesome, and cleanly lodging and diet for travellers and stubble, fodder, and corn or pasturage . . . for their horses.”²²

Another kind of tavern sprang up in larger towns such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charles Town. Not tied directly to travel, these public places offered patrons not only food, drink, and male companionship but also a variety of diversions. In the eighteenth century, these urban taverns often sorted men according to social rank.

Whatever the rank of patrons, drinking lay at the center of tavern life. Almost no one in colonial America—not even the Puritans—condemned moderate drinking. Correctly believing that water (given its quality at that time) was potentially dangerous to one’s health, the colonists turned to alcoholic drinks for nutrition and refreshment as well as for alleged medicinal values. Nearly everyone began their day by consuming some kind of alcoholic beverage, drinking accompanied nearly all meals, and in the evenings men frequently came together in taverns to engage in bouts of ritualistic drinking. Apart from the release from daily cares promised by drink, tavern attendance helped to solidify social ranks, strengthen fraternal bonds, and aid business transactions and political deals.

Some form of “gaming” (gambling) and other pastimes frequently accompanied drinking. Not only did tavern patrons employ dice and cards for wagering but they also bet on how much a particular drinker could consume before passing out or falling down. They seized on the occasion to set up cockfights and horse races. Sometimes taverns offered opportunities to see exotic animals, to dance, to learn “the art of fencing,” and even to learn the “French tongue.” While billiards was frequently outlawed, in the larger towns men could nearly always find a tavern with one or more billiard tables. Even in Quaker Philadelphia, a William Gregory reported in 1756 that he “went to a billiard table a mile out of town—they are forbid being in town & [I] played till towards bed-time.”²³ In the nineteenth century, the roadside taverns were increasingly replaced by hotels and the city taverns by saloons. But the close link between drinking, drinking establishments, and sports continued into the new century, and persists to this day.

likely to feel somehow unseemly. “I was not sent into this world to spend my days in sports, diversions, and pleasures,” wrote John Adams in the middle of the eighteenth century. “I was born for business; for both activity and study.”²⁴ Heirs of the Puritan tradition rarely engaged in sport simply for pleasure. Rather, they sought larger justifications, such as glorifying God or renewing and strengthening the body for more important tasks.

The Great Awakening and Republican Ideology

Sports took another blow in the 1730s and 1740s, when a religious revival of unprecedented proportions, known as the Great Awakening, swept through the colonies. Evangelicals, as Great Awakening converts came to be known, were if anything more suspicious of sport than the first Puritans. They believed in searing conversion experiences and an absolute submission of the self to a demanding and omnipotent God. Spiritual rebirth launched evangelicals on crusades against the evils of the secular world, in which they demanded complete purity in the church and in individual behavior.

Everywhere the evangelicals tried to suppress or at the least restrain the more boisterous sporting ways. A typical instance occurred in 1739, when the Great Awakening’s most renowned evangelist, George Whitefield, met with the governor, local ministers, and several gentlemen in Annapolis, Maryland. “Some of the company, I believe, thought I was too strict, and were very strenuous in defense of what they called innocent diversions,” Whitefield reported, “but when I told them everything was sinful which was not done with a single eye to God’s glory, and that such entertainment not only discovered [reflected] a levity of mind, but were contrary to the whole tenor of the Gospel of Christ, they seemed somewhat convinced.”²⁵

For the rest of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, evangelical Protestants continued to mount campaigns for the reform of leisure activities. In 1774, a Virginia planter lamented the influence of an evangelical group whose members “are growing very numerous and . . . quite destroying pleasure in the country; for they encourage ardent pray’r; strong and constant faith & the entire banishment of gaming dancing & Sabbath-day diversions.”²⁶ Sportsmen throughout the colonies voiced similar complaints.

Republicanism, the political belief that sparked the American Revolution (1775–1783), also tended to inhibit sports. According to this theory, a successful republic—a state with sovereignty residing in the citizenry rather than a hereditary aristocracy or a monarchy—could not be founded upon the idle amusements of the decadent monarchies of Europe. For the American Republic to survive and prosper, its citizens needed to be especially virtuous and abstemious; they had to abstain from luxury, practice frugality, and avoid dissipation.

Adherents of republicanism joined evangelical Protestants in encouraging the revolutionary governments to suppress popular pastimes. The First Continental Congress called for the colonies to “discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse-racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock fighting, exhibition of shows, plays, and other expensive diversions and amusements.”²⁷ The Sons of Liberty, an extralegal citizen group that spread to most of the colonies, worked to impose such strictures on the population for the duration of the revolution. The new states likewise adopted sumptuary laws designed to curtail personal extravagance. As Samuel Adams,

both a product of Puritan New England and an ardent republican, put it, each state ought to strive to become a “Christian Sparta.”

Thomas Jefferson, republicanism’s leading champion, also worried about the effects of popular diversions on the new republic. “Games played with the ball and others of that nature, are too violent for the body and stamp no character on the mind,” Jefferson flatly advised his nephew, Peter Carr. He blamed the English gentry for the tendency of young American “gentlemen” to gamble, drink excessively, engage in riotous sports, and patronize prostitutes. If the young American “goes to England,” Jefferson wrote in another letter, “he learns drinking, horse racing, and boxing.” In addition, “he is led, by the strongest of human passions, into a spirit of female intrigue . . . or a passion for whores, destructive of his health, and in both cases learns to consider fidelity to the marriage bed as an ungentlemanly practice.”²⁸ In these letters Jefferson aptly spelled out a fundamental republican fear, namely that the indulgences of the European monarchies and upper classes threatened to spread like a cancer and destroy the virtue and simplicity essential to a republic’s existence. Nothing haunted the imaginations of the republicans more than an idle, pleasure-loving aristocracy.

In the end, the republican goal of abstemious behavior fell short of its goals. Even during the revolution, many ignored the demands for frugality and self-denial. General George Washington himself instructed his officers to encourage innocent “games of exercise for amusement” among the troops in the Continental Army. Soldiers bowled (sometimes using cannonballs) and played wicket (a form of cricket), shinny (a game similar to field hockey), fives (a form of handball), base (a form of baseball), and football (the medieval version of the game). Washington’s orders to suppress gambling were frequently ignored.

Indeed, during the last half of the eighteenth century, America increasingly became an integral part of a larger North Atlantic market of commercial leisure. After mid-century, itinerant theater troops from London began to stage plays in cities along the Atlantic coast from Boston to Charles Town. As early as the 1750s, English equestrians and acrobats regularly visited the colonies, including the “celebrated” Anthony Joseph Dugee, who performed “on a slack wire scarcely perceptible with and without the balance.” During the last two decades of the eighteenth century, the incidence of cockfighting as well as other kinds of diversions apparently increased. Instead of implanting a new respect for simplicity, frugality, selflessness, and order, as many of the revolution’s leaders had hoped for, the revolution and its accompanying ideology fostered at least an equal amount of disorder and extravagance.²⁹

Conclusion

By the end of the eighteenth century, the continent that was home to the newly founded United States of America had become a remarkably diverse place, bringing together people from many backgrounds and traditions of many kinds. Some sporting traditions, such as the clandestine *engolo*, remained confined to specific communities. Others, such as horse racing, had begun to cross cultural boundaries, taking on new forms and serving new purposes. The stage was also being set for far greater changes. In the nineteenth century, economic expansion, urban growth, and great advances in both transportation and communication would give rise to a new set of sporting cultures suited to a transformed social and economic world.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. In what situations did religious belief encourage sporting competitions? In what situations did religion impede sports?
2. How can you use the development of colonial American sports to explore the ways that the colonial American society both resembled and diverged from European society?
3. To what extent do present-day sports include elements of “festive culture”? How do you account for this persistence (or lack thereof)?

Notes

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2. Quoted in *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, Vol. 13 (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers, 1897), 130.
3. See E. Michael Whittington, ed., *The Sport of Life and Death: The Mesoamerican Ballgame* (Charlotte, NC: The Mint Museum of Art, 2001).
4. For an account of sport in Spain and the Spanish colonies, see Jorge Iber et al., *Latinos in U.S. Sport: A History of Isolation, Cultural Identity and Acceptance* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2011), chapter 1.
5. Richard Holt, *Sport and the British* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
6. Quoted in *ibid.*, 4.
7. Quoted in Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in British Society, 1700–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 83.
8. See Mary Lou LeCompte, “The Hispanic Influence on the History of Rodeo, 1823–1922,” *Journal of Sport History* 12 (Spring 1985), 21–38.
9. For recreation in the southern colonies, see T.H. Breen, “Horses and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling among the Gentry in Virginia,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (1977), 239–57; Jane Carson, *Colonial Virginians at Play* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg, 1965); and C. Robert Barnett, “Recreational Patterns of the Colonial Virginia Aristocrat,” *Journal of the West Virginia Historical Association* 2 (1978), 1–11. For the contrast between southern and northern life, see C. Vann Woodward’s classic essay, “The Southern Ethic in a Puritan World,” in C. Vann Woodward, ed., *American Counterpoint* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971). Quote is from Breen, “Horses and Gentlemen,” 250.
10. Quoted in David H. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 361.
11. T.J. Desch Obi, *Fighting for Honor: The History of African Martial Arts in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008).
12. For an account of early African American jockeys, see Ed Hotaling, *Wink: The Incredible Life and Epic Journey of Jimmy Winkfield* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), chapter 1; and Ed Hotaling, *The Great Black Jockeys* (Rocklin, CA: Forum, 1999).
13. Quoted in Edmund S. Morgan, *Virginians at Home* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 88.
14. Quoted in Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 102.
15. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620–1647* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 97. For an indispensable collection of primary sources for early American sports, see Thomas

- L. Altherr, ed., *Sports in North America: A Documentary History*, Vols. 1 & 2 (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1997). The most analytical treatment of sports in early Anglo-America is Nancy Struna, *People of Prowess: Sport, Leisure, and Labor in Early Anglo-America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).
16. Quoted in John C. Miller, *The First Frontier* (New York: Dell, 1966), 87.
 17. Hans-Peter Wagner, *Puritan Attitudes Towards Recreation in Early Seventeenth-Century New England* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Lang, 1982), 48; Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., *The Puritans*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1963), I, 392. See also Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995).
 18. Quoted in Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 148.
 19. Wagner, *Puritan Attitudes*, 34; and Albert B. Hart, *Commonwealth History of Massachusetts*, 5 vols. (New York: Historical Society, 1927–30), II, 280.
 20. Quotations in Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 552, 555. See J. Thomas Jable, "Pennsylvania's Blue Laws: A Quaker Experiment in the Suppression of Sport and Amusements," *Journal of Sport History* 1 (1974), 107–21.
 21. See Stephen Brobeck, "Revolutionary Change in Colonial Philadelphia: The Brief Life of the Proprietary Gentry," *William and Mary Quarterly* 33 (1976), 410–34.
 22. Sharon V. Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 19. See also Struna, *People of Prowess*, chap.
 23. Quoted in Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking*, 210.
 24. John Adams, *The Work of John Adams*, 5 vols. (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1840), II, 125–6.
 25. Quoted in Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1977), 145.
 26. Hunter D. Farish, ed., *Journal & Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg, 1943), 96.
 27. Henry S. Commager, ed., *Documents in American History*, 2 vols. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), I, 86.
 28. Quotations in Thomas L. Altherr, ed., *Sports in North America*, Part II, 75; and Henry S. Commager, ed., *Living Ideas in America*, new ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 555–6.
 29. See especially Struna, *People of Prowess*, chapter 8, and the data in Nancy Struna, "Gender and Sporting Practices in Early America, 1750–1810," *Journal of Sport History* 18 (1991), 13ff, as well as Richard E. Powell Jr., "Sport, Social Relations and Animal Husbandry: Early Cock-Fighting in North America," *International Journal of Sport History* 5 (1993), 361–81.

CHAPTER 2

The Setting for Nineteenth-Century Sports



Spectators line the Long Island racecourse for a race between two regional rivals, Peytona, who hailed from Alabama, and Fashion, from New Jersey.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division [LC-USZ62-843].

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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| <p>2.1 Describe how economic, cultural, and technological factors both facilitated and impeded the growth of nineteenth-century American sports.</p> <p>2.2 Explain how technological developments aided the development of popular sports.</p> <p>2.3 Analyze the ways that the dominant Victorian culture impeded the development of sports.</p> | <p>2.4 Outline the factors that contributed to the development of a sports-centered Victorian counterculture.</p> <p>2.5 Discuss the changes in sports and society that helped make sports more respectable near the end of the nineteenth century.</p> <p>2.6 Articulate the ways that people at the margins of American society used sports to try to improve their social standing.</p> |
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On May 13, 1845, nearly 100,000 eager spectators made their way to the Union racecourse on Long Island, New York. Wagons and carriages clogged the roads, creating enormous traffic jams. Trains converged from all directions. The crowds came to a race between two celebrated mares: eight-year-old Fashion, from New Jersey, and the much younger Peytona, who hailed from Alabama. The contest was notable not only for the elevated stakes—the winner would take home \$20,000—but also for the broader political issues it invoked. At a time when the country's western expansion and the question of slavery in the new territories were sparking rising tensions between North and South, a contest between northern and southern horses carried a special edge. Horse racing had become one way that Americans played out sectional conflicts, and southerners were aching to avenge two previous high-profile losses: the defeat of Sir Henry by Eclipse in 1823, and Fashion's triumph over the southern stallion Boston in 1842. The entire South rejoiced when Peytona crossed the finish line ahead of her more seasoned rival.

The Fashion–Peytona contest marked the end of an era. As North–South conflicts progressed toward war, emotions became too heated for intersectional sporting competitions. Interest in horse racing also dwindled. Still, the forces that had nurtured the 1845 extravaganza would continue to spur other forms of sport. The growth of industry and corporations, revolutions in communication and transportation, rising per capita incomes, and the rapid growth of cities all created conditions suited to sporting competitions with mass appeal. In addition, radical changes in society and work undercut traditional sources of excitement, job satisfaction, and a sense of belonging, prompting a search for other forms of self-improvement and self-fulfillment. These conditions combined with the sporting ways of the past to produce a range of athletic contests that differed significantly from the folk games that had once dominated the continent.¹

The panoply of new sporting endeavors often mirrored a society that was rapidly separating into different groups: captains of industry who directed mammoth enterprises; immigrant workers who filled an expanding range of low-wage industrial jobs; middle-class women beginning to enter politics and paid employment; and newly freed slaves trying to make their way in