

THE CREATION OF AMERICAN TEAM SPORTS BASEBALL AND CRICKET, 1838- 72

**George B. Kirsch
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**A Review by Dr. Jennifer Clark, Lecturer in American History
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Devotees of cricket are well aware that the game originated in England and spread across the world with the far flung British Empire. What may not be so well known, is that cricket was America's first modern team sport and vied with baseball for the honour of becoming the national game.

The early success of cricket was not so surprising when you think about it, because the United States began life as a collection of English colonies. Even after independence was declared in 1776, ties with England remained and enormous numbers of British immigrants continued to seek opportunities in the New World. They took with them their love of cricket.

Why cricket failed to win over the hearts of Americans and why baseball eventually proved more popular is the subject of this new book by sports historian, George B. Kirsch.

By examining the nature of both sports and the way they fitted with the characteristics and demands of American society, Kirsch tries to answer the question, 'Why do certain sports prosper in some countries, but fail miserably in others?'

In 1868, Henry Chadwick, writing for the American Chronicle of Sports and Pastimes thought he had the answer - cricket was "slow and tedious".

"Fast people of America" demanded a game with more action, he said.

This was only part of the problem, argues Kirsch.

Cricket faced major initial disadvantages because ball games for adults were frowned upon in an America strongly influenced by conservative religion. As late as 1859, a Maryland congregation dismissed some of its young men for playing what was seen as a disreputable game.

Added to this adverse climate of opinion there were difficulties preparing and maintaining suitable grounds, especially in the highly

urbanised regions. Cricket conventions were unable to promote the game nationally and players were unwilling to encourage boys or novice adults in the game.

Perhaps most importantly of all, cricket was dominated by English immigrants who largely neglected the native-born.

The game had the reputation of being supported by gamblers and miscreants and the clubs were wracked with in-fighting. To make matters worse, the players weren't even very good.

In 1856, a match was organized between a visiting English team and an American side. The Americans (although mostly English-born players anyway) lost this game four years in a row - even though they fielded eighteen against the English eleven! A defeat was humiliating enough, let alone with such an apparent advantage.

Then came the Civil War and cricket in America had all but disappeared.

By 1856 baseball had equalled cricket's popularity but unlike its competitor, baseball continued to grow in strength until it was recognised as the national sport. Fast-moving quick to play and watch, well-organised and well-regulated, baseball suited the new urban, industrial America far better than cricket.

Kirsch deals with sport in its social and historical context, as part of human culture, responding to changing conditions and always evolving.

Kirsch offers sensible reasons for the varying American history of two major world sports but his purpose would have been better served by an international comparison.

He cannot answer his question, "Why do certain sports prosper in some countries but fail miserably in others?" without that comparative dimension. The question is an important one that should be asked, but the only answer Kirsch can provide is why baseball succeeded where cricket failed in the attempt to become America's national sport.

This is not just another book on cricket or baseball, but an attempt to come to grips with the phenomenon that is national sport.