

Somers, Dale A., THE RISE OF SPORTS IN NEW ORLEANS: 1850-1900, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972).

A captivating, scholarly investigation of the role of sport in a major southern city, Dale Somers' *The Rise of Sports in New Orleans: 1850-1900* makes a significant contribution to social history in general and to southern urban sport in the mid-nineteenth century in particular. It is a much needed addition to the already impressive list of some eight texts on New Orleans published by the Louisiana State University Press. The book adds to our understanding of the role played by sport in American culture and gives us a brief glimpse of why sport has become so important as a leisure outlet of urban America.

One of the largest and most industrialized sport cities in the South, New Orleans was depicted as a fun-loving city with a reputation for dissipation and amusement. The rise of sport during the period under consideration was due, in part, because sport provided a social safety valve* for the masses of persons to "blow off steam" in a usually acceptable manner.

The density of urban populations: the insistence that everyone engage in what was constantly described as the ruthless struggle for survival; the disappointment and disillusionment felt by the vast majority of people who could never hope to rise to the top rungs of the economic and social ladders; the necessity for synchronizing and regimenting the movements of people in such crowded environments and the friction caused by the presence of thousands upon thousands of people with diverse social, economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds produced a potentially explosive situation. Sports, along with other forms of recreation offered an outlet for the tensions of urban life.

After developing the milieu, the author presented a brief description of the play life of the residents prior to the Civil War showing that sport was divided by class in New Orleans as was the culture socially and economically. Sports, such as rowing, baseball, cricket, yachting and horse racing rose to prominence because they were supported by the city's affluent merchants and planters. Some of the sports supported by the masses were prizefighting, pedestrianism, animal baiting, target shooting, billiards, bowling, and raquette. By the 1860's, however, sport in some form existed for all classes out as an organized phenomenon it had not become a democratic leisure-time activity.

The second portion of his book dealt with a detailed development of sport after the Civil War. Included were such sports as horse racing, baseball, sailing (yachting), rowing, boxing, and bicycling. In addition, he developed a brief analysis of sport for all citizens and touched upon the topics of the woman in sport and segregation in sport. A large portion of the chapter on the athletic club included the early story of intercollegiate sports at Tulane University. The growth of the athletic club was, in a sense, the outcome of an attempt to cleanse sport "from the attendant evils of professionalism."

One of the most important chapters in the book is Chapter XII entitled Final Inspection in which Professor Somers attempts to give meaning to a wealth of factual material found in the course of his research. Some of the topics touched upon were the meaning of sport as a leisure-time activity in an urban setting; reasons for the rise of sport during the last three of the five decades covered; the role of industrialization on sport in New Orleans: the effect of sport on journalism; the effect of sport on the local economy; effect of sport on the city's park system: the effect of sport on women and its influence on behavior and dress fashions; and the effect of sport on race relations.

The organization of the book is well conceived. The writing is colorful yet precise; the author is to be commended for his reliance upon primary source material including manuscripts, diaries, periodicals, newspapers, and official documents such as club constitutions, institutional, state and federal acts. The book is obviously written by a competent historian who practices high standards of scholarship. I recommend it as essential reading for the student of sport history.

Marvin H. Eyster
University of Maryland

*For a development of the social safety valve idea see: Frederick L. Paxson, "The Rise of Sport," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, IV, (1917)pp. 142-168.