

Frederick Jackson Turner,
The Revisionists, and Sport Historiography*
by: Douglas K. Fidler, George Coroneos,
and Michael Tamburro
The University of Massachusetts

INTRODUCTION

Frederick Jackson Turner, in his desire to look at American history from an American perspective, developed one of the most thought-provoking theories ever constructed in American historical studies. The implications of his theory were many, but one in particular, that of the safety valve, was one of the most controversial. It is the object of this paper to investigate the safety valve theory and its effect on subsequent theories of the importance of sport.

In order to develop a firm basis for explaining its effect on sport, the authors will first explain the Turner thesis and its implications. Next, they will review the literature of some of the proponents of the thesis, followed by a review of the work of several revisionists. Once this basis for study has been established, the authors will explain the sport safety valve theory. A review of literature of the sport safety valve theorists will add further explanation to the thesis, after which the authors will convey some of their thoughts on the subject.

Sport historiography is a field in which much can, and should, be done. It is important not only to the study of sport, but also to the study of American history and culture. The authors will complete their investigation of the Turner thesis and its impact on sport by discussing sport historiography and its importance in the development of a body of knowledge about sport.

Frederick Jackson Turner rejected the theory of Herbert Baxter Adams, his distinguished mentor at Johns Hopkins University, on the study of American institutions. Adams advocated the "Germ Theory," which proposed that American institutions were merely germs of European institutions, transported from the Continent by emigrants. Turner believed that an American need look only at America to understand her history. Turner grew up in Wisconsin during the 1860's and 1870's, seeing the west in its greatest period of development in American history, and it is therefore understandable why he placed so much emphasis on the development of the frontier. The history of America must be unique, he thought, for nowhere else

*Revised copy of a paper first read before The First Annual Convention of The North American Society for Sport History at the Ohio State University on Friday, May 25, 1973.

Douglas K. Fidler, George Coroneos and Michael Tamburro were graduate students at the University of Massachusetts when this article was written.

had there been a frontier which so fully captivated the minds of a people. An American was a new breed of man, born in the wilderness and shaped by a new world.

Turner challenged the *ancien regime* of American historical thought when in 1893 he read his paper on the "Significance of the Frontier in American History" before the American Historical Association's meeting at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois. He presented his radical theory to a stunned historical world, causing more fomentation of conservative minds than had ever occurred in American historiography. The American, he argued in his paper, had had a unique experience in the history of mankind. There had always been the western frontier, the presence of which had shaped American institutions. From the frontier sprang democracy, the great melting pot of all peoples which caused class lines to disappear. Turner revelled in the belief that the rugged individualist, the prototype of the American, came from the west. This mythical man was the self-made man, who conquered the savage wilderness, despising any help from others. Turner lovingly traced the development of the west from the Cumberland Gap to the Pacific Ocean. He also set forth an hypothesis, really a minor one in his study, which claimed that the frontier acted as a social safety valve, without which America would have exploded in a great cultural upheaval. The west, Turner thought, served to stabilize the volatile working class of the northeast. Those thrown from work during one of the numerous depressions of the 1800's could move westward, where they could start life anew on cheap land furnished by the government.¹

A theory so radical as the above would necessarily cause a polarization of historical thought. There were those who welcomed this new idea with open hearts, as they had long searched for a theory that could explain the development of the United States from an American viewpoint. There were those who remained proponents of the "Germ Theory" of Adams, whether they be firm believers of the theory, or just against change. Of course, there were also those who rejected it because of the essay's numerous historical errors and misinterpretations. Whether for or against Turner's new theory, few could remain silent, and numerous articles were prepared for publication.

Avery Craven (1937) praised Turner for his work, saying that his greatest asset was that he presented a theory so thought-provoking that he spurred further investigations. The paper was not an exhaustive study, Craven suggested, but was aimed at calling attention to the influence of the frontier. Craven also pointed out Turner's use of demographics in his historical studies.² Walter

¹Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: 1920).

²Avery Craven. "Frederick Jackson Turner" in *Marcus W Jernegan Essays in American Historiography*, ed. William T. Hutchinson (Chicago: 1937).

Prescott Webb (1951) supported Turner because he believed that the theorist was correct in looking at the frontier as the synthesizer of institutions.³ Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick (1954) rapped the critics for their harsh judgment of Turner's work. The revisionists, they explained, put down the thesis for textual errors without replacing it with something concrete.⁴

Some critics have been outspoken in their judgment of Turner's paper. Louis M. Hacker (1933) cited many historical errors, calling them harmful to historical interpretation. He argued that America's experience was different from that of Europe's, but definitely not unique.⁵ Benjamin F. Wright (1934) found fault with Turner's treatment of American institutions. He suggested that the thesis failed to attribute that the west continued to take forms of government already present in the east at the time of statehood and that all of the western state constitutions contain bills of rights, were run on the federal model of government, and eventually had two-thirds majority laws.⁶ Carter Goodrich and Saul Davison (1935) believed the city was the safety valve, as it drained the dissident farmers of the Populist Movement away from potentially violent rural areas. They rejected the idea of an omnipresent safety valve, saying that, at best, something can be only potentially a safety valve.⁷ G. W. Pierson (1942) criticized the work for being purely social psychological, for it put overwhelming emphasis on idealistic rather than pragmatic improvement. He also suggested that Turner did not see the failure of men to specialize in government, and the emphasis on the spoils system.⁸ Fred A. Shannon (1945) objected to Turner's use of the free land as a safety valve. People moved to the west to get rich quickly, he said. He also saw the urbanization of America creating a situation which prevented any safety valve from working.⁹

The Turner thesis has affected sport historiography as well as ideas in institutional history. When attempting to account for the rapid growth of sport in America after 1850 and the importance of sport in American life, many historians have turned to the safety valve theory of Turner in order to explain sport phenomena. Turner failed to project what the next safety valve would be after the frontier closed,

³Walter P. Webb, "Ended: 400 Year Boom. Reflections on the Age of the Frontier." *Harpers Magazine* (October, 1951) 203: 25-33.

⁴Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, "A Meaning for Turner's Frontier, Democracy in the Old North-west." *Political Science Quarterly* (Sept.-Dec., 1954) 69: 321-53, 565-602.

⁵Louis M. Hacker, "Sections - or Classes?" Review of F.J. Turner's "The Significance of Sections in American History", *Nation* (July 6, 1933) 137: 108-110.

⁶Benjamin F. Wright, "Political Institutions and the Frontier" ,*Sources of Culture in the Middle West*, ed. Dixon Ryan Fox (New York: 1934).

⁷Carter Goodrich and Saul Davison. "The Wage Farmer in the Westward Movement, I", *Political Science Quarterly* (June, 1935) 50: 161-185.

⁸G.W. Pierson, "The Frontier and American Institutions: A Criticism of the Turner Theory", *New England Quarterly* (June, 1942) 15: 224-55.

⁹Fred A. Shannon, "A Post Mortem on the Labor-Safety-Valve Theory." *Agricultural History* (January, 1945) 19: 31-37.

but early sport historians, attracted by the Turner thesis, readily accepted his safety valve theory, claiming that sport replaced the vanishing frontier. Frederic Logan Paxson (1917) proclaimed sport as the new safety valve, stating that between 1850 and 1900 it was built and applied in the United States. He hypothesized that the rugged individualist of sport took the place of the rugged individualist of the frontier.¹⁰ A decade later John Allen Krout (1928) concurred with Paxson's conclusion that sport had become the safety valve of America. The industrialization of America, although taking people away from the out-of-doors at first, soon provided by automation and higher wages a way to get back to nature. Organized sport replaced the vanishing frontier as the safety valve by allowing the working class to vent its frustrations and energies at play.¹¹ John R. Betts (1953) proclaimed sport as the cure-all for the pressure of industrialization.*

The first emigrants from Europe came to the new world in search of wealth, prestige, and power for their church and country. These pioneers considered themselves as subjects of their king, and not Americans. All of their thoughts were for home, whence came their speech, habits, customs, and religion. The colonial institutions were not the same for all the countries. Basically, the southern European countries, especially Spain and Portugal, "subordinated the individual to the state, the pioneer's principal function was not to enrich himself, but to help create a strong nation and a powerful church."¹³ This philosophy kept the pioneers subjugated to the ruling powers without the initiative of an independent spirit. The northern European nations, in particular England and France, emphasized "the role of the individual in the subjugation of nature, giving him free rein to exploit the new land for his own benefit."¹⁴ This system produced a hard working group of settlers which, having become independent through salutary neglect, began to lose at an early date its political ties with the mother country. The Americans of the 1770's, resenting George's attempts to bring them into closer union with the throne's desires, finally revolted, winning political independence. Despite political independence, however, they were sadly dependent upon the Continent, as much of the institutional structure, philosophy, modes of dress and manners, and other cultural products were taken directly from Europe's influence. The European nations, contemptuous of the young upstart, sought to control her economi-

¹⁰Frederic Logan Paxson, "The Rise of Sport." *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (September, 1917) 10: 143-168.

¹¹John Allen Krout, "Some Reflections on the Rise of American Sport," *Proceedings of the Association of History Teachers of the Middle States and Maryland* (1928) No. 26.84-93.

¹²John R. Betts, "The Technological Revolution and the Rise of American Sport," *1850-1900.*" *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (September, 1953) 40: 231-256.

¹³Ray Allen Billington, *The Far Western Frontier. 1830-1860.* (New York: 1956) p. 1.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

cally in order to prevent her from gaining power through trade. For a generation after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, American shipping fell prey to the navies and pirates of England, France, and other nations. Only after the completion of the War of 1812 was America able to prevent piracy and impressments. Lacking a common bond of purpose, America had been easily subjugated to the influence of Europe. During the Era of Good Feelings, however, Americans began to experience that bond which was needed to unite them. This was Manifest Destiny, so named by John O'Sullivan in 1845, which was the deep belief in the potential greatness and of the divine mission of America. The period of Manifest Destiny, that is, the great physical growth of America, lasted only from 1825 to 1850. But the feeling that it inspired has made a lasting impression upon Americans. It has inspired, as David Q Voigt illustrates in his fine paper "Reflections on Diamonds: American Baseball and American Culture," "a liberal nationalist style of philosophy with an emphasis on the free individual, on limited government, and on *laissez faire* economics and individuality. So broad has been the appeal for this style among Americans, that American politicians have long dreamed of exporting it everywhere so as to usher in a global millenium of peace and prosperity,"¹⁵ Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri was one of the first politicians to express this desire for the exportation of the American system. He claimed in 1825 that America was destined to rule in the world as the harbinger of democracy. He suggested that America had first to expand to the Pacific Ocean because in order to control the Pacific trade necessary for world power, America must have western ports. He also saw the west as an agricultural Eden for the happy yeoman farmer, the mythical man so cherished by the Republican Party.¹⁶

While America was able to expand toward the Pacific, she experienced few internal problems. The American people were still basically Anglo-American in 1825, so few problems existed between ethnic groups. Also, the energy of the people was spent on the outward movement. Once this outward expansion ceased, however, pressure began to build within the American society. Many of these pressures, both good and bad, can be readily seen. In the 1840's a second religious Great Awakening renewed faith in God and His mission for America, creating a new missionary fervor, especially from the Baptist and Methodist sects. Industrial expansion began in the 1850's, creating a sudden growth in the cities and, along with the increase of foreign nationals there, the social pressures inherent in metropolitan areas. Anti- foreign leagues grew with these cities, as the

¹⁵ David Q Voigt, "Reflections on Diamonds: American Baseball and American Culture." *Journal of Sport History* (May, 1974) I: 3-25.

¹⁶Stephen B. Oates. Notes from lecture on the History of Western Expansion.

Anglo-Americans there resented competition for jobs and housing from the new arrivals. Pressure caused by the expansion of borders and industry, the tremendous growth of the cities, and the great influx of immigration created anti-social behavior: increasing crime, violent rioting, vigilante lynchings, and the burning of whole districts of cities.

Turner claimed that the western frontier drained the pressure from the rapidly expanded American society, preventing a revolution like those of Europe. He failed to recognize that there was indeed a social revolution within the United States. The northern industrial society managed to eliminate much of the way of life of the southern planter aristocracy in the decade between 1855 and 1865. The Great Rebellion occurred because of the failure of the appearance of a safety valve, and it was indicative of those violent years when men were slow to compromise and quick to act. A social safety valve does not exist which can alleviate pressure from within a social system. If fomentation of society fails to occur, it is because all of the necessary elements are not present at the correct time. Turner believed that the west acted as an outlet for the working class. He failed to see that a revolution of working class people in America could not have occurred because, traditionally, the American working person has been a conservative supporter of the government. The Protestant work ethic that developed in America has created the belief that by hard work, wealth can be obtained. No safety valve was present to quiet the economic unrest following the Civil War. Runs on banks, labor strikes, and race riots continued to occur regularly throughout the century. In the twentieth century the absence of a safety valve can be seen, as none was present to prevent the implosion of our economy in the last 1920's and the 1930's, nor to prevent the great student unrest, the racial violence, or the assassinations of the 1960's. Violence and economic unrest occurred in each case because all factors necessary for the upheaval were present at the proper time.

Despite evidence belying the existence of a safety valve, some historians, interested in the role and development of sport in America, still consider the safety valve theory to be valid and applicable to sport. John P. Betts, in his brilliantly written essay on "The Technological Revolution and the Rise of Sport, 1850-1900," related the growth of sport with the massive growth of industrial technology. He believed that the growth of sport occurred because of urbanization, immigration, increase of leisure time, commercial promotion, upper class patronage, and the rise in technological invention. He saw sport as a safety valve because it was an antidote for the poisonous effects of industrialization: the long hours with small pay; crowded, squalid, living conditions; over-population; inadequate transportation: and lack of recreational facilities.¹⁷

¹⁷Betts, *op. cit.*

Frederic Logan Paxson in "The Rise of Sport" attributed the rise of sport in America to the closing of the frontier. The Americans were a moving people and after the closing of the frontier this inward pressure for movement had no escape. This energy, according to Paxson, focused on sport. When the frontier closed in the 1880's and 1890's, the habit of an open life was too strong to be challenged off hand. The search for sport became a particular substitute for it. The moral integrity of the nation could be achieved through play. The wide interest in sport tended to allay social unrest and lessen the possibility of potential uprisings. A social safety valve was needed to compensate for the closing frontier.¹⁸ John Allen Krout, in his "Some Reflections on the Rise of American Sport," relates the industrial revolution and rise of sport. He claimed that industry locked Americans in and the out-of-doors became a memory of youthful pleasure. The very force of industrialization which placed Americans indoors, ultimately enabled them to rediscover the out-of-doors, and to substitute for a vanishing frontier a safety valve in a strenuous age.¹⁹

Sport did not rise with the city to alleviate the problems of congestion nor because of the need for release of pressure caused by the closing frontier. Sport has always been present in good times or bad, in the city or the country, in ancient times or modern. Industrialization created city problems, but sport proved to be only a diversion, temporary in nature, and not diversionary for all. The technological advances helped to alleviate the tension, not sport: sport is the by-product of the advances. Sport rather than being a social safety valve, has been part of the cultural pressure that builds up within the society. Sport is part of the American way of life and has been with Americans at all times. Whether on the Boston Common in 1770, on a wagon train on the Great American Desert in 1870, or in a San Franciscan backyard in 1970, sport will always be found in our society. Sport is not a social safety valve because the very meaning of the term implies that it must not be a part of culture, but an adjunct to it. Thus, the quest for new horizons is the key to the place of sport in American culture, not the safety valve thesis. As Americans reach each new horizon, they will bring sport with them. The attainment of each new horizon is part of the pursuit of the "American Dream."

American history might be characterized by the pursuit of dreams. The ability of Americans to be essentially united has been a result of having a common goal. Problems have arisen in the past when the people have been unable to unite around the common end. Enough people united around the quest for independence to bring that dream to fruition. The dream of expansion of America from "sea to shining

¹⁸Paxson, *op. cit.*

¹⁹Krout, *op. cit.*

sea” filled the early nineteenth century citizen with the greatest zeal. The poor of Europe saw America as the answer to their dreams, coming by the thousands to escape famine and oppression. Turner was correct in assuming the importance of the west in American history, but was incorrect in portraying it as a safety valve for the worker. The frontier was an answer to the prayers and dreams of every farmer for free and extensive land. Industrialization in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries made the United States the greatest industrial power on the globe. This superiority in technology and the spread of American influence overseas has led the United States to the position of world leadership, thus partially fulfilling the dream of Manifest Destiny. Now that the American way of life has been supplanted upon the rest of the world, America will now look to the stars in the future. The divine mission of our forefathers has yet to be completed.

What of sport in America? Sport has been an important part of America’s dreams. Wherever the American has gone he has taken his pastimes with him. Sport has become a medium through which proof of world superiority can be demonstrated. When Harvard rowed against Oxford in 1869, the race was seen as a battle between two ways of life rather than one between two colleges. Voigt documents three different occasions between 1874 and 1914 when “baseball leaders launched major missionary efforts aimed at planting our game on other soils.”²⁰ He reported later in his paper the later Commissioner “Spike” Eckert’s belief that baseball was a “potent tool of American foreign policy.”²¹ Every four years Americans enter into the Olympic Games to prove their superiority, and much importance is placed upon the medal tally so that the American system can be judged in relation to other systems. Our sporting heritage has even followed us to the world outside our Earth, as already the moon has been used as a driving range.

The purpose of this paper has been to show the importance of historiography and its effect on the study of sport history. The development of historiography can not be stressed enough. Only through scholarly research and the interpretation of information can a body of knowledge for the subject area be established. As controversial as his thesis may have been, Frederick Jackson Turner not only presented his opinion of the development of America, but added to the general body of knowledge of the subject area. He established the corner stone upon which others could build. Sport history, for the most part, has been thus far ignored by historians because it has failed to achieve the academic status as, for example, social or political history. The key to attaining the academic visibility

²⁰ Voigt, *op. cit.*, p. 17

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

needed to attract young talent for growth of the field is the development of sport historiography. Before sport historiography can be developed, however, the sport historian must be first adept at interpreting general history in order to understand the place of sport in society. When he learns to apply his knowledge of general history to that of sport history he will have taken the first step necessary to develop sport historiography and academic visibility for sport history. Sport history must never be divorced from general history, as it is an important part of it. With general history as the medium of reference, the place and importance of sport in the history of man will assume a greater relevancy than has the disjointed array of sports trivia now called the history of sport. All efforts must now be taken to begin the study and use of general history for the creation of building blocks of knowledge. But let us heed the lesson found in "Chaos in the Brickyard," that charming little tale by Bernard K. Forscher. Let us not be obsessed just with the making of bricks of knowledge, but carefully mould each brick we produce, being ever mindful of its proper place in the temple we are attempting to create. Let us never make so many unrelated bricks that we lose the distinction between a pile of bricks and the true edifice of knowledge.²²

²²Bernard K. Forscher. "Chaos in the Brickyard," *Science* (October 18, 1963) 142:3590.

