

**War and Trifles:
Sport in the Shadows of
Civil War Army Life
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Saw some billard playing + some died in the hospital.
Diary Entry of L. G. Hutton (February 22, 1862) .¹

War without the fascination of trifles, without the relief of simple objects which provide color and texture to life, was not the war of 1861. For amidst the destruction, marching absurdly with the sanguine and the internecine realities of war were the flying banners, the marching bands, the brilliant uniforms, the galloping generals, the campfire choruses, and the votaries of sport. The latter were as much a part of the reality of that war as were the privations and the sufferings. Undeniably, the Civil War was hell just as Sherman had said it was. The death and the destruction cannot be glossed over by the sideshows of soldier life. The beacon of history has quite correctly focused its light upon the more terrible aspects of war. Yet, there are the shadows which cavort in the backwash of history's searchlight. Within these shadows lies much that was meaningful, much that was important, and much that lends texture and definition to the picture of the Civil War. Sport was part of the shadows of army life. It was part of the fascination, and it provided meaning and texture to soldier life.

Perhaps the most salient of all the triflings connected with that war were the periods when the army sat and appeared to do nothing. For most soldiers these were periods of uncertainty since they seldom knew in any definite way how long the respite would last or where they would go when it ended. There were of course rumors which grapevined their way from soldier to soldier and from camp to camp. This kind of communication, however accurate it might prove to be, was always suspect in the eyes of the veteran. All that could be done was to wait, to filter through the myriad of rumors which emanated from dubious sources, and to get bored with it all.

Boredom was as much a reality of soldier life during the Civil War as were the battles, the gunshots, and the march of

armies. It derived from two distinct aspects of military existence. The first and perhaps most obvious situation was when the soldier had free time with little or nothing to do. This bred a sense of confinement or captivity that was decidedly distasteful to the soldier. Indeed, it prompted a young New York recruit to describe Army life as "worse than prison."²

There were activities that could divert attention and occupy time. Soldiers played cards, went news walking, played tricks on each other, sang songs, swapped lies and in general found ways to amuse themselves. The problem, however, with cards and campfires was that these kinds of activities could not alleviate the sense of confinement. They were sedentary diversions which served only as euphemisms for idleness. They provided no activity. The soldier's sense of confinement was directly related to inactivity. Because of this, something of a more active nature was necessary. Sport was a natural response.

There was a second cause for boredom. Military life frequently regressed to the mundane tasks of everyday existence. Even though the soldier was kept busy, the repetition of uninteresting, unenjoyable and unchallenging duties incurred his rancor. This was particularly true when tasks were assigned for specific time periods each day. Soldier life became standardized and prosaic. It was aggravating to clean tents or to march in the hot sun. The adage that a busy soldier is a happy soldier is not entirely correct. Drills, marching, or guarding hay bales may indeed keep the soldier busy but few of the participants would conclude that these kinds of activities promoted happiness. Stonewall Jackson's belief that camp sites ought to be changed frequently to prevent soldiers from becoming bored with their surroundings and to provide an active alternative to idleness may have been the brilliantly conceived method for bolstering morale that some officers thought it was; but for the foot soldier required to accomplish the task, it was only more work.³ In comparison, a snowball battle, a target shooting contest or a baseball game provided excitement and challenge to an otherwise humdrum day. That touch of sport when added to drill made it enjoyable or at least more bearable. The baseball game interjected excitement and a consequential relief of the mundane. Beyond this the dereliction of duty while at a snowball fight, a rabbit chase, or a horse race which drew soldiers away from prescribed duties was an affrontage to the military establishment which sponsored the boredom.

Sport provided an alternative to those conditions from which boredom derived. A Bucktail recruit from Western Pennsylvania described the occasional boxing matches which took place near Washington, D. C. during the first winter of the war as entertainment which served to break the monotony of camp life. A Virginia officer believed that Confederate soldiers participated in sports because they were bored and because they were aggravated by the feeling of confinement which arose from being inactive. A North Carolina soldier agreed. For soldiers in the First Minnesota, sport was a means for passing the time in camp. Sport provided activity and broke the sense of captivity. Because it was a physical activity, sport could ameliorate the tedious irritation associated with the sedentary periods of soldier life. Because of the competition, the challenge and the excitement of sport, it could assuage the mundane and the prosaic repetition associated with the everyday tasks of a soldier's existence. Sport was an alternative to boredom because by its very nature sport contained the elements necessary to obviate the sedentary and the mundane. An active soldier was a happy soldier just as long as the activity engaged in contained physical action, competition, and a sense of challenge and excitement.⁴ In a similar way sport functioned as an euphemism for despondency and doubt.

Like any other human being, the soldier at times felt sorry for himself. Given the opportunity he could complain about almost anything, indeed soldiers often do. This process by itself is not necessarily bad, particularly when it involves the society of others who are in the same predicament. At these times comradeship tends to obviate the selfness of individual tribulations. However, when the soldier had the time and the inclination to question his predicament and to speculate about his future within the quiet confines of his own mind, remorse was possible. Let us not forget that with few exceptions Civil War recruits knew little of the harshness of war. Until they had "seen the elephant" their optimism and enthusiasm were not severely challenged. Defeat, cold, hunger, disparaging letters from home, deaths of friends, doubts of military leadership, and doubts of self worth formed the bastion of self-pity. It was, for example, perfectly natural for Union soldiers to feel sorry for themselves after the battle of Fredericksburg. They had been ordered to charge entrenched positions and they knew beforehand that success was impossible. The countryside was littered with dead friends and comrades. The survivors were cold, wet, and dirty. The approach of the Christmas

season brought with it nostalgic memories of happy holidays at home with friends and loved ones. Some soldiers had viewed the removal of McClellan as a bad omen. Burnside's Fredericksburg campaign solidified their opinions. The present was unbearable and the future seemed dim indeed. In the quiet aftermath soldiers had time to reflect and to speculate. Despondency and doubt hung like great dark clouds over the Union camp at Falmouth.⁵

Sport wasn't something that soldiers could eat or put on. It was no replacement for worn out shoes. Nor was sport the answer to disparaging letters. Life's problems cannot be solved by playing ball. A snowball battle or a rabbit chase could not bring back dead friends or change defeat into victory. And surely, sport didn't bolster confidence in Burnside's ability to out-think and out-manuever "Bobby Lee".

But sport made the soldier forget these problems. Obviously, this was a matter of degree. While at sport the soldier played and in the excitement of the moment had fun. He pushed his problems away from immediate inspection. Sport gave him something else to do besides worry, and when he stopped it gave him something else to talk or brag about. For the soldier there was no solution to the above problems. It was not a matter of choice or of vote. He was trapped and there was little he could do but hope. Despondency and doubt were dark clouds because they obviated a roseate prospective of the future. Sport pushed the harsh realities and the harsher predictions of what tomorrow would bring into the corners of the soldier's mind. For the moment he played and had fun.

Sport then influenced the soldier's mood because sport had the capacity to direct attention away from the cause of doubt and despondency. This process was in evidence from the very beginning of the war. George Lewis, a young Rhode Islander, recalled the fall of 1861 as a period when the boys had a revival of their school days in games of ball. Lewis believed that these amusements prevented homesickness because they promoted happiness. Alexander Hunter proclaimed a similar outcome for sport during the early days of training camp near Manassas junction. Like their Northern brothers, many Confederate recruits were away from home for the first time. The introduction to military life left Johnny Reb homesick, bored, and discontented. Many returned to school boy sports and Hunter believed that because of this "good humor and contentment reigned."⁶

The capacity of sport to alter and to improve the mood of soldiers lasted throughout the war. Francis Morse, a young New Yorker, believed that the rabbit chases which occurred in the fall of 1862 were valuable episodes because they prevented depression. William Locke, a soldier in the 11th Pennsylvania describes the spring at Falmouth in 1863 as a period of discontent. Soldiers were in what he called a "morbid state of mind." A momentary relief was found through trials of physical strengths, quoits, and baseball games. Locke believed that these sport activities had altered and improved the soldier's mood. Colonel J. Howard Kitching of the 6th New York Artillery confided to his diary that he had been very blue lately. The winter at Brandy Station had provided time for him to reflect upon his past life and to speculate upon the immediate future. "I have been so worried lately," he wrote, "that I am not like my old self at all." A snowball fight altered Kitching's mood. For the moment he was once again carefree and happy and he believed that the frolic did a great deal of service. Benjamin Jones, a member of the Surry Light Artillery, recalled the trials of the waning days of the Confederacy. Confederate soldiers, under-fed and poorly clad, faced certain defeat in the spring of 1865. Yet, they appeared somehow to be happy and confident. Jones' decision was based upon his observations of Confederate soldiers at sport and during these instances they appeared both happy and confident. Nathaniel Wood recalled the trenches around Petersburg as a place of wrestling, running, jumping, boxing and other sports. These activities helped to improve Confederate morale. Charles O'Ferrall, a rambunctious Irishman in the 12th Virginia Cavalry, recalled the strange capacity of sport to alter moods and to gloss over remorse. O'Ferrall related that a soldier could be bowed one hour in the deepest distress, and in the next hour engage in a horse race or some other sport activity. Sorrow, remorse, fear, and despondency could be chased away, if only for the moment, by the gusto produced through sport.⁷

Some officers were aware of sports capacity to alter mood. In a few instances sport participation became their prescribed antidote for homesickness, despair, and discontentment. Francis J. Parker, an officer in the 32nd Massachusetts, noted a sharp increase in homesickness and discontentment in the army following the Battle of Antietam. To counteract this, several attempts were made to initiate games and athletic exercises among the men. It was believed that sports would take their minds off their problems. A 10th Vermont surgeon prescribed

football to cure the ills of one alleged shirker. The sick man at first declined the offer for he swore it would kill him. Apparently, however, the lure of the football game was too much for his common sense; for shortly later, he was observed in the thick of it alive and kicking. John Perry, a surgeon in the Second Army Corps, planned to build a gymnasium for Union soldiers in the winter of 1862-1863. Perry believed that the soldiers would feel better after exercise and would be happier. Francis Meagher, leader of the Irish Brigade, frequently prescribed sports. He believed that sport activities improved the life and energy of his command. Meagher's insight may have been prompted by his own love of sport. Perhaps because of his fondness for sport and because of his personal experiences at sport, Meagher was able to grasp the inherent capacity of sport to draw soldiers out of despondency and into activity.⁸

The sense of excitement which derived from sport was contagious. Soldiers hearing a commotion off in the distance would "pop over" to investigate. Once there, it was only too natural for them to want to join in the fun. The electrifying milieu radiating from the sport occurrence was compelling and impetuous soldiers joined the contest. Hence, there were during the war mass sojourns to the swimming hole, to the ball field and to the snowball battleground. Companies, regiments and whole brigades became mesmerized by the sport attraction. Here, at least superficially, was a spontaneity and an enthusiasm which spread like fever to all within ear shot. Joiners were drawn from all levels of the social spectrum and occasionally military distinctions were leveled. Social contagion moving randomly through armies and army camps was a trenchant determinant for mass sport during the countless stopovers on the road to Appomattox.

The contagious excitement emanating from the sport event drafted soldiers for at least three reasons. First, both Johnny Reb and Billy Yank were by nurture and by inclination participants. Sport was an activity initiated and conducted by the players. Although enjoyment might be and at times was experienced by lookers-on, the ultimate was actual physical involvement. Watching with no prospect of joining was like being shot and having your name spelled wrong in the newspaper. The great crowds that gathered to celebrate New Year's Day at Falmouth in 1863 or St. Patrick's Day in March of that same year were not there to witness the festivities but to join

them. The great snowball battles of 1862 and 1863 drew participants not spectators. Rabbit and fox chases were not spectator events. Indeed, it was impossible to exclude would-be joiners. Soldiers simply would not spectate. Perhaps this was why a Massachusetts soldier could report seeing over 200 games of baseball going on at one time, or why a football game could be played by hundreds of soldiers, or why campaign marches could be momentarily disrupted by the appearance of a swimming hole. Civil War soldiers invariably recorded that they played at sport not that they witnessed it. Sport was something that one did. The countless boxing, wrestling, jumping and running matches that marked the idle hours between boot camp and Appomattox were attended by would-be participants.⁹

A second reason for the capacity of sport to draw would-be participants into the fold of active involvement was that sport was not an esoteric activity. The novice might at first feel some reluctance to join but this was soon overcome. Foolish mistakes caused by the lack of skill or the lack of sound judgment occasioned good-natured teasing. Justus Scheibert, a foreign observer attached to General Lee's staff, was undaunted by his lack of prowess at chess. Although he was always beaten, he continued to play the game, a matter of no small amusement to General Lee. Martin Haynes, a private in the 2nd New Hampshire, spent the winter of 1864 near Point Lookout. Boating became a fetish during the spring and everyone seemed determined to try it. Three of Haynes's comrades became over-enthusiastic. They procured a dugout canoe and fitted it with a sail intended for a much larger boat. Once the boat reached the bay, a stiff breeze promptly blew it over. Catastrophe was averted by the timely entrance of a gun boat which rescued the three adventurers. Many uninitiated soldiers joined the sporadic boxing symposiums which occurred throughout the war. Watching others, who were perhaps highly skilled, made boxing look easy and fun. A young cannoneer named Augustus Buell recorded what may have been a typical incident. After watching the others box for awhile, this recruit decided that he would have a turn at the gloves. Luckily, his first opponent was also a novice. The two would-be pugilists merely wore each other out and neither was hurt. Buell, spurred by an exalted opinion of his prowess, decided to challenge a more skillful opponent. He chose Sergeant Jim Cahill of the Regular Artillery. This was not the best possible choice for Buell to test his mettle. Cahill outweighed Buell by 30 pounds and had about a two-inch reach on him. Beyond this, Cahill was an

excellent boxer with prior ring experience. If ever a novice had gotten in over his head, that novice was Augustus Buell. Cahill at first declined the uneven match but after many supplications agreed to spar a few rounds. It was a good natured fight. Sergeant Cahill confined himself to dodging the wild punches of the challenger much to the amusement of the crowd. Finally, the sergeant decided it was time to throw a punch and the fight promptly ended. Although young Buell continued to box throughout his military career, he was in the future more careful about who he chose to fight.¹⁰

The above examples of sport did not disrupt the normal functioning of the Army. They were predominantly free time activities initiated after prescribed military duties had been completed. They drew soldiers who for the most part had nothing to do. Usually the sport occurrence took place with the approbation of the higher levels of military echelon. Although not directly involved in the organization or in the actual contest, officers were aware that the members of their command were playing at sport. Officers, North and South, regarded these kinds of activities as either beneficial or innocuous so long as the game didn't interfere with military duties. When sport became disruptive, steps were taken to prohibit participation or to eliminate the attractive nuisance altogether. Theoretically, this approach initiated by the military power structure should have been successful. It was not.¹¹

A third reason for the impact of social contagion was that soldiers were intrepid in their quest for sport. Faced with probable structure and concomitant reprimand, they somehow believed it possible to escape both. Throughout the war soldiers participated at sport when it was inappropriate. Sometimes they resorted to subterfuge so that they could hide their absence and thereby escape censure. Charles Banes, a member of the Philadelphia Brigade, recalled preparing hourly reports ahead of time so that his absence while fishing might go unnoticed by his superiors. Bill Shackelford, a private from Arkansas, had his mess mates cover for him at morning roll call while he went crab fishing. This was, however, not always successful, and Shackelford was frequently sent to the guard house because his sport occurred at an inopportune time. Other soldiers simply up and left to go hunting, fishing, or swimming. This defiance of military regimen did not go unnoticed. A group of southern soldiers were off hunting when their absence was discovered by Stonewall Jackson. Jackson became irate

when informed that the gentlemen involved were indulging their love for sport and that this kind of an occurrence was not unusual. Stonewall proclaimed that he would have the gentlemen involved shot upon their return. He was further angered to learn that the gentlemen involved politely declined his offer, stating that they would be happy to return at such time as the charges were dropped. After much stamping of the feet and grinding of the teeth, Jackson stormed off in disgust and the errant sportsmen returned, one supposes, to hunt again when the mood moved them.¹²

Soldier sportsmen did not always attempt to hide their travesties of military decorum. At times they openly revolted against those military strictures which would have prevented sport. Hence, a group of Bucktail soldiers standing at morning inspection could suddenly break ranks to chase a fox which had strayed across their parade ground, leaving commanders at a loss as to how to restore military decorum until Reynard had been caught. A band of Confederate soldiers from the 21st Virginia could charge after a deer which happened too close to their camp. Admonitions and reprisals were ineffective preventatives. This same group of Virginians would stage cockfights all along Jackson's monumental Shenandoah Valley Campaign disrupting the march and impeding the progress of their soon to be famous "foot cavalry." The 21st Virginia was not alone in this, however, for the Rockbridge Artillery which traveled with Jackson during the Valley campaign also staged cock fights and even had a trainer-coach for their fighting cock. Officers were powerless to prevent the dispersion of Jackson's marching column because cockfights were too great an attraction for stricture to overcome.¹³

In a similar vein forced marches which passed swimming holes during summer were doomed to disruption, at least momentarily. Soldiers frequently went in swimming at inappropriate times. On the day after the Second Battle of Manassas soldiers in the Second New York Artillery went swimming. Their frolic was interrupted by the Rebel Cavalry and soldiers were forced to scurry for cover. The march to Gettysburg was broken up by swimming sojourns which engulfed whole regiments. Soldiers in the Thirty-Seventh Massachusetts arrived at Gettysburg in the afternoon of July 1, 1863. Behind Little Round Top they found a small mill pond and within a few minutes the soldiers were in swimming. Less than a mile away the Iron Brigade was fighting for its very

existence. During the Confederate retreat from Gettysburg the Fifteenth Alabama stopped near Warrenton, Virginia. There was time for a quick swim before the Union Cavalry could chase them away. Even Grant's "Last Campaign" with all its climactic battles and deaths had its swimming parties. Soldiers stumbling from one blood bath to another took time for a swim. It was almost as if soldiers decided that they were going to have their fun and officers could either agree or be ignored.¹⁴

Social contagion is at least as strong a determinant for action as is stricture. In the above set of examples the three aspects of social contagion are most clearly illustrated. Undoubtedly, the mesmeric attraction of sport was partially responsible for the soldiers' actions. Beyond this, the natural inclination to participate in the fun of the moment accentuated the drawing power of sport. Because sport was not an esoteric activity, even the uninitiated joined. Finally, there was a feeling of safety within the group. This phenomenon had been well documented by historians and observers of the Civil War in respect to battle. Groups of soldiers standing in exposed positions displayed an apparent disregard for danger. Groups of soldiers charging after a rabbit, or running wildly to see who would be first into the water, or racing to witness a cockfight were apparently oblivious to officers or to war. They had apparently forgotten what danger they were in from officer reprimands or from the enemy. Perhaps they didn't care. George Putnam, a young soldier in the 114th New York, recalled a baseball game played near Alexandria, Louisiana. The game was interrupted by Rebel skirmishers who shot the right fielder and captured the center fielder. Putnam's strongest lament was that the Confederate soldiers took the baseball and it was the only baseball Putnam had.¹⁵

The temerity displayed in the above instances was a response derived from a value system. Soldiers esteemed physical courage and physical skill. They had been nurtured in a society that valued these attributes. In the soldier fraternity social acceptance was related to displayed bravery and displayed athletic skill. The individual was judged, and indeed judged himself, on the basis of how well he could ride a horse, box, hit a baseball, or pitch a quoit. Beyond this, he had to be able to conduct himself in the rough and tumble give-and-take atmosphere of a snowball battle or a football game. Hence, he joined the activity partially because he wanted to and partially because of social coercion. One was forced to join if one wanted

to be accepted into the social fraternity of soldiers. Courage and physical prowess had to be displayed. Snowball shirkers and baseball flops need not apply.

Social coercion, then, was a strong determinant to action because participation and displayed skill were related to acceptance. There were several examples of this influence. Colonel Thomas Livermore found himself popular with his men because he jumped his horse across a wide ditch in front of camp instead of riding across the connecting bridge. General Hartstuff won the plaudits of the 13th Massachusetts because he was skilled at catching and throwing a baseball. When Colonel Watkins captured the prize at a racing symposium, the soldiers in the 141st Pennsylvania regarded him as a hero. Sergeant Moore of Company F, 127th New York, was highly regarded by his men because he was a champion runner and jumper. Corporal Tanner of the 132nd Pennsylvania became a hero overnight because he won a footrace with a speedster from the 4th New York on Christmas day in 1862. Thomas Aldrich of the 1st Rhode Island was regarded as a hero because he could throw the shot farther than anyone in his brigade. An anonymous soldier in the 6th Wisconsin, whose nickname was Baby, was esteemed because he was a tremendous wrestler and a great jumper. George Benedict respected the officers and the chaplain of the 12th Vermont because they joined in a rough and tumble game of football. Augustus Buell decided that General Grant was a decent fellow because Grant expressed an interest in fishing.¹⁶

Confederate soldiers also won acceptance and respect by proving their courage or physical prowess on the athletic field. Bob Bond, a member of the 1st Arkansas, was respected because he was the best jumper in the regiment. A young Irishman named Jerry achieved hero status because he could wield a shillalah better than any of his fellows. Doctor Meek of the 68th Tennessee was popular not because he was a good doctor but because he was the best swimmer in his company. Edward Henderson won a reputation as a fine horseman because his horse, Arab, was an excellent jumper and very fast. Harry Gilmer, a private in the 1st Maryland, was esteemed because he was an excellent swimmer. Frank Ezeel was respected because he could throw a baseball harder and straighter than anyone. General Longstreet was popular with recruits while at Centerville because he was a superb horseman and because he enjoyed hunting. General Robert E. Lee was regarded

favorably because he didn't get upset when he was hit by a snowball. John Casler, an outspoken private in the Stonewall Brigade, respected those officers who demonstrated that they could "take it" during a snowball fight.¹⁷

For some Civil War soldiers athletic prowess was paramount to their conception of self worth. Much like present day Saturday night athletes, exploits on the sport field became expanded in the telling. Hence, there were a number of horses in both Union and Confederate camps that could run faster or jump higher than anything on four feet. There was even one horse that would jump anything its master set it to but would jump for no one else. Charles Davis, a baseball player in the 13th Massachusetts, believed that his 1863 team could have beaten any of the professional teams that existed during the 1890's. Thomas Aldrich, a player in the 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery, may have believed that his team could do the same. Aldrich played nearly every day during the winter of 1863-64 and apparently was never beaten!

Perhaps the most embellished accounts of individual valor and skill dealt with snowballing. John Adams, an officer in the 19th Massachusetts, proved his valor and military skill by successfully routing the entire right wing of his regiment. Adams engineered a flank attack with 20 colored servants who drove all before them. Headquarters vanished, and as his comrades in the left wing watched, Adams won the day. Private Hampton, of the 63rd Virginia, accomplished an even more remarkable feat. Almost single handedly, he drove the 54th Virginia from the field. Although in the thick of the fight where the snowball firing was the heaviest, Hampton was seldom hit. By his own admission, Hampton emerged from this exploit triumphantly hailed as hero, not only by members of the 63rd Virginia but by the officers of the vanquished 54th Virginia who drank toasts to his valor.¹⁸

Sport was a measuring ground for manhood. This was why the soldier bragged about his competitive accomplishments, and this was why he sometimes embellished the account. A man could do things that required athletic ability; he could stand and be counted among the unflinching when physical danger threatened. Billy Yank and Johnny Reb were boys trying desperately to be men. War demanded that of them. They responded by doing those things that men did. The athletic field was his practice ground and his test site because at sport the soldier could display those attributes that men valued. His

worth from the standpoint of skill and courage could be judged. This process was discernible in many forms of sport but was most evident in the sporting techniques chosen by some soldiers to settle their differences.

Quarrels, arguments, and grudges were frequently settled with fists. Private Edmund Brown of the 27th Indiana remembered his first winter encampment at Frederick, Maryland as a time of adjustment. Soldiers were learning to adapt to military life and to each other. New acquaintances were silently judged on the basis of their apparent worth as soldiers and as men. As so frequently happens when large groups of strangers are forced by circumstance to be neighbors, disputes and animosities developed. Quarrels were common. Occasionally a down right fist-fight resulted from some argument or petty disagreement. It was not considered the thing to do at that time to separate two men at all equally matched until one or the other had said enough. The soldier fraternity sanctioned physical confrontation and physical redress of grievances. This was equally true of the Confederate Army. Indeed, a colonel in the 17th Virginia discovered that breaking up fights only led to further animosity. Soldier combatants left the scene with the argument unresolved and their anger had time to build. Beyond this, the colonel found that he had incurred the rancor of the whole soldier society. Friends and lookers-on wanted the disagreement to be decided. When belligerents were allowed to slug it out, grudges were settled and friendly relations resumed. The point of honor had been resolved.¹⁹

These affairs of honor at times actually interrupted the war. During the Battle of the Wilderness, May 4-7, 1863, a Confederate soldier and a Union soldier decided to settle their differences through a fist-fight. Due to the natural terrain of the area, the Battle of the Wilderness was actually a series of small battles. These were hotly contested fights where soldiers knew little of what went on except in their immediate area. One of these small battles took place across a deep gully and in the process of charge and countercharge a soldier from each side got trapped in the gully. Actually, the gully was not such a bad place to be. Although escape was impossible, because the war raged above directly across the gully, the occupants were quite safe and could even stand erect. Realizing their predicament each of the two soldiers decided to explore the gully to see what it contained and just where it led. It was inevitable that they should discover one another. As might be expected,

each immediately claimed the other as prisoner. Arguments followed. Apparently, neither soldier was a particularly persuasive orator, and the soldiers decided to settle the matter with their fists. The men therefore climbed out of the gully and squared away between the two battle lines.²⁰

The appearance of the two men caused a great commotion. When they took off their coats and began to pommel each other, a cheer went up along both lines. Soldiers rushed forward to get a better view of the proceedings. Finally the boxing match ended. The Confederate victor and the Union vanquished rolled back into the gully again. Their disappearance was the signal for the resumption of fire.²¹

The dispute between the two soldiers had been settled in an honorable fashion. The choice of method had been quite natural, and even though the site and time were seemingly ludicrous, the soldiers had stopped shooting long enough to witness the outcome. Spectators may have been vicarious observers. Braggadocio was common in both Northern and Southern camps, and the idea that one "reb" or "yank" could whip ten of the opposition was not uncommon. Spectators may have been merely interested in seeing if the braggard could really do it. The moratorium on hostilities was probably a natural response. Soldiers on both sides had seen disputes settled in this manner. It simply wouldn't have been good form to have shot either or both of the soldiers. The settling of a point of honor in a sporting fashion was an unwritten rule of conduct that the soldiers within both lines of battle simply could not ignore.²²

War and trifles, the serious and the frivolous, were equal parts of the reality of soldier life. History may worship the serious by focusing its attention upon the carnage and the destruction of the Civil War. Military historians may debate the judgment of particular generals, quarrel over strategies and underscore missed opportunities. The hardships, the travail, and the heartaches of soldier life may be calmly or emotionally placed upon the written page to somehow provide meaning and understanding. The story of the war may be told through the marches of the armies and the climactic battles with huge casualty lists. The classic confrontations between Lee and McClellan, Pickett at Gettysburg, and Grant's last campaign are familiar to all. Yet, the story is incomplete without the trifles.

Sport was part of the simple objects and pastimes which provided fascination and meaning to individual existence. Trivia

may be unimportant when juxtaposed next to the sweep of history, but to the individual living today and tomorrow it is immensely important. It forms a part of everyday life that can be enjoyed, remembered, and perhaps understood. The soldier seldom knew in any complete way what was going on during battle. He knew only that he was being shot at, ordered around, and that he might not survive. The reasons why all of this was happening or what it all meant were unknown. Sport was part of the tangible realities of everyday existence. Like the battle, it had no transcendent meaning. Sport had no impact upon the outcome of the last battle nor did it have any apparent impact upon future fights. It was merely an element of soldier life that was tangible enough to provide meaning for today. Hence, a Civil War soldier could declare in the same breath that he had seen some billard playing and that some had died in the hospital. Both were tangible realities that the soldier could see, hear, feel, and experience. The serious and the trivial were each a part of everyday existence during the Civil War just as they are today. History may choose to report the serious but the individual who lives from day to day remembers and looks for the trivial perhaps because it provides more meaning.

FOOTNOTES

¹Diary of L. G. Hutton, Typescript, University of Texas Library, February 22, 1862.

²There are a number of excellent sources which deal with soldier life and the boredom it contained. Some of the better general sources are: John D. Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee* (Boston: G. M. Smith and Company, 1887); Carlton McCarthy, *Detailed Minutiae of Soldier Life in the Army of Northern Virginia* (Richmond: C. McCarthy and Company, 1882); Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Publishers, 1943); Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Publishers, 1951); Francis A. Lord, *They Fought for the Union* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1960); Fred A. Shannon, *The Organization and Administration of the Union Army 1861-1865* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1928); The quote is from A. Davenport to his homefolk, 8 July 1862, New York Historical Society: cited by Wiley, *Billy Yank*, p. 277.

³John H. Worsham, *One of Jackson's Foot Cavalry; His Experiences and What he saw during the War 1861-1865* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1912), p. 149.

⁴Edwin A. Glover, *Bucktailed Wildcats* (New York: T. Yoseloff, 1960), p. 69; Benjamine W. Jones, *Under the Stars and Bars* (Richmond: E. Wadley Company, 1909), p. 20; Daniel G. MacNamara, *The History of the Ninth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry* (Boston: E. B. Stillings and Company, Printers, 1899), p. 280; Charles A. Stevens, *Berdan's United States Sharpshooters in the Army of the Potomac, 1861-1865* (St. Paul, Minn.: Printed by the Price-McGill Company, 1892), p. 396; Richard W. Iobst, *The Bloody Sixth* (Durham, N. C.: n.p., 1965), p. 50; Lemuel A. Abbott, *Personal Recollections and Civil War Diary*

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²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*