

# The Playing Fields of St. Louis: Italian Immigrants and Sports, 1925-1941

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The following essay, "The Playing Fields of St. Louis," examines the interrelationships between immigrants and urbanization upon two generations of Italian-Americans between the 1920s and World War Two. The article contends that sport played a galvanic role in the acculturation of Italian-American youth, and that athletic voluntary associations became major factors in the evolution of the neighborhood in the 1920s and 30s. Sport channeled forces that had historically divided Italian immigrants in St. Louis and harnessed these divisive energies into creative participation. Finally, the emergence of a neighborhood athletic federation provided a powerful symbol of ethnic group identity. Recreational enterprise performed a dual purpose. It accentuated the Italianate character of the colony, helping to retard assimilation. But sport also allowed athletes to become Americanized and acculturated them into a larger urban society through the participation of intra-city teams.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, sport encouraged not only the preservation of an ethnic subculture, but the preservation of the community itself.

Several forces helped solidify the Italian-Americans gathered in St. Louis into a cohesive ethnic community. These factors—geographic isolation, the local economy, the Roman Catholic Church, the neighborhood school, the urban gangs, and the many voluntary associations—also contributed to, and were affected by, the phenomenon of sport.

"Six-hundred Italians, a community saloon, the North of Italy tongue, and a \$500 Italian flag," constituted the basics of "Dago Hill," which according to a 1901 journalist was "unique among the communities of St. Louis."<sup>2</sup> Attracted by economic opportunities in the clay mines and brick factories of Fairmount Heights, northern Italians from Lombardy and southern Italians from Sicily began arriving in the 1880s and by the turn-of-the-century, the district in southwest St. Louis was dubbed by immigrants as "*la Montagna*,"—the Hill. Natives derisively called the colony "Dago Hill."<sup>3</sup>

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Geographically and culturally, the Hill remained an isolated and insulated colony for the several thousand Lombards and Sicilians who had arrived by 1910. The colony's cultural homogeneity reinforced the insularity; well over 90% of its residents hailed from Italy.<sup>4</sup> Typically, immigrant colonies were situated in inner-city districts. Not so for the Hill, which was located miles from the congested St. Louis downtown. Not until the 1920s would bus service provide intra-city transportation for area residents.<sup>5</sup> Most first-generation Italians preferred the seclusion of the self-sufficient community. "When I was growing up in the 1920s," recollected Lou Cerutti, a life-long resident, "the Hill was like a little country town."<sup>6</sup> The bus ride to Sportsman's Park widened the social vistas of second-generation Italian-Americans like Joe Garagiola, but his immigrant parents clung securely to their geographic isolation. "Downtown," Garagiola reminisced," as far as Hill mothers and fathers were concerned, was the place you went to take your citizenship test. Otherwise, downtown was as far away as the Duomo in Milan [Lombardy]."<sup>7</sup>

By 1920, more than 3,000 first and second generation Italians had settled on the Hill. Given the local industrial character of the area and the lack of urban transportation, it was natural that nearly all the residents worked in the local brickyards, clay mines, and foundries. Pay was low and mobility limited. Hill Italians were drastically over-represented at the bottom of the St. Louis occupational ladder; nearly four times as many workers were classified as "unskilled laborers" as in the city (35% vs. 9%).<sup>8</sup>

No-nonsense Italian immigrants had come to St. Louis to work. No work, no dignity. The demands of work and the challenges of building a community exacted harsh sacrifices from these immigrants. Having emigrated from a rigid social-economy which treated peasants like slaves, Lombards and Sicilians viewed leisure as a plaything for the *prominenti* (the elite). "A cane, work, and bread make for beautiful children," counseled a Sicilian proverb.<sup>9</sup> Giovanni Schiavo, a pioneering historian writing about the St. Louis Italian community, observed in 1929:

It is well known that as a whole the Italian immigrant has not brought with him any traditions of national games . . . the only pastime for which the immigrant is noted is apparently *bocce* [an Italian game resembling lawn bowling]. National American games do not appeal to the average Italian.<sup>10</sup>

However, Schiavo pointed out that the sons of these immigrants were attracted by the lure of sport. "Their leisure," he wrote, "is more a sign of their own particular environment, rather than the influence of national trends."<sup>11</sup> Yet precisely at the moment Schiavo penned those words (1929), Hill Italian-Americans were poised at a pivotal crossroads, as national and local forces were reshaping the values and institutions of ethnic America.

The 1920s witnessed the transformation of American sport and the rise of the

athlete as hero. The proliferation of radio and the urban tabloid penetrated ethnic America—even once isolated colonies such as the Hill. Italian-Americans were swept into the sporting vortex both as spectators and participants. Whereas no Italians were represented in the major leagues between 1901-1906, and where only two Italian rookies broke into the circuit in 1920 (out of 133), by 1941 fully eight percent of big league rosters counted Italians, more than double their share of the white population.<sup>12</sup> Individual exploits of Tony Lazzeri, Ernie Lombardi, and Joe DiMaggio popularized the sport in Italian communities. In the boxing ring, Italian-Americans were even more prominent, to the point that by the 1930s that group boasted more champions than any other ethnic cohort.<sup>13</sup> These idols became important role models for second-generation ethnics, who importantly, now had the leisure time to indulge in recreation.

The first waves of Italian immigrants possessed neither the time nor inclination to play soccer or join an athletic club. By the mid-1920s industrial laborers were receiving one and a half-days' rest per week and some paid holidays. Moreover, the young remained in school longer and began work at a later age than their immigrant fathers.<sup>14</sup>

Youth would be served. Italian parents, unconcerned with birth control, produced large families, thus supporting the swelling ranks of the second-generation who were susceptible to the lure of athletics. During the decade of the 1920s more than 700 men aged fifteen to thirty matured on the Hill. A thousand more joined the demographic ranks in the 1930s making the youth cohort a majority of the population.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, these young men were second-generation Italian-Americans, aggressively “new world” in social outlook. In sociological terms, this group was becoming acculturated, acquiring America’s language, aspirations, and ideas.<sup>16</sup> Young boys were rebelling ‘against the patriarchal domination of old world fathers, reported social worker Elmer Wood in 1936. Many, he noted, “were ashamed of their parents.”<sup>17</sup>

The neighborhood school, another powerful Americanizing and organizing influence, served both as a laboratory for democracy and a cauldron of socio-economic conflict. Italian parents looked upon the American school with suspicion and distrust. Unlettered immigrants (in 1930, illiteracy rates for foreign-born adults on the Hill approached 40 percent) saw the institution as a threat to parental influence.<sup>18</sup> Compounded by the growing needs of the family, Hill Italo-Americans made limited educational gains. “A fourteenth birthday means a work certificate and a farewell to studies,” lamented Ruth Crawford in 1916.<sup>19</sup> Little had changed two decades later when a student observed that few Hill students finished the eighth grade and even fewer finished high school. “Most of the Italian children have difficulty in school because of

their language handicaps and poor home training,” wrote Wood.<sup>20</sup> Appallingly, in 1940 only eleven Italian-American males over age twenty-five claimed a high school diploma, making that cohort the least-educated group in metropolitan St. Louis. Blue collars predominated.<sup>21</sup>

Inside P.S. 101, children learned world geography; outside the cloistered halls, they quickly assimilated the essentials of ethnophysical geography. “Well, let’s give you a little geography,” chuckled Lou Berra (no relation to “Yogi”), obviously delighted in his role as teacher:

Kings Highway . . . the creek . . . railroad tracks . . . that was our boundary! . . . Up the Hill we had the Blue Ridge Gang—Irish. To the northwest we had the Cheltenham Gang—a mixture of Germans and more or less natives. East of Kings Highway was the Tower Grove Gang, what most of us refer to as Hoosiers, people up from small towns . . . then the Dog Town Gang to the west. . . . You go beyond that and you get your ass kicked around so you stayed within your limits.<sup>22</sup>

The rude confrontation with a hostile outside world presented a difficult transition to some, a challenging proposition to others. “In school they taught me all about democracy,” remembered Sam Chinnici, a Sicilian immigrant. “Then you would come outside and find these antagonisms and would have to fight for all the things they taught you in school. We used to have these fights.”<sup>23</sup> To outsiders, there was no mistaking the Hill’s ethnic boundaries; to insiders, once Italo-Americans left the colony, “Krauts,” “Micks,” and “Hoosiers” lurked in the shadows. “If you got caught on the other side of Southwest Avenue,” reminisced Lou Cerutti, “you got the heck kicked out of you!”<sup>24</sup>

Like urban teenagers across the country, Hill Italo-Americans clustered into their street comer societies. “Every kid on the Hill belonged to a gang or club,” remembered Joe Garagiola. “You either belonged or were out of the action.” Called the Hawks, Falcons, Ravens, Little Caesars, and Stags, gangs proliferated throughout the 1920s and 1930s climaxing in 1941 when nearly fifty neighborhood clubs boasted a thousand neighborhood members.<sup>25</sup> Whereas the spirit of *campanilismo* (old-world localism) governed the selection and membership of the mutual aid societies among the first-generation arrivals, second-generation club members relied on block-territorial imperatives, regardless of the parent’s old-world ties. “All the kids around my age who lived on Elizabeth Avenue made up a sports club,” recollected “Yogi” Berra.<sup>26</sup>

In urban enclaves across the nation, gang members coalesced around territorial loyalties. “There is a definite geographical basis for the play group . . .” contended Frederick Thrasher in his classic study of the gang:

The gang . . . is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face-to-face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict and planning. The results of this collective behavior is

the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, *esprit de corps*, morale, group awareness and attachment to local territory.<sup>27</sup>

In his classic study, *Street Corner Society*, the participant-observer William Foote Whyte reported the raucous and colorful lifestyle of Comerville. Like Comerville's gangs, Hill athletic clubs mapped out territories, sponsored club houses, respected intricate internal hierarchies, participated in local politics, and bootlegged moonshine.

The Hill also had its William Foote Whyte, in the character of Elmer Shorb Wood. A social worker and graduate student, Wood became a confidant to the colony, reflecting later that "I doubt if there was another person who had been in more homes and had the pleasure of knowing and observing family life on the Hill to a greater degree than I [1930s]."<sup>28</sup> The young sociology student was particularly fascinated by the gang phenomenon, whose characteristics bore great similarity to other working-class, bachelor subcultures:

Boys and young men between ages 16-25 have . . . established gangs, or what they term athletic clubs, where they spend their unoccupied time. . . . A few years ago when the easy money was available (prohibition era) and the community gave them a free rein, the activities of these gangs became anything but moral. One or more prostitutes from outside the Hill would be imported.<sup>29</sup>

Wood further reported that at one school teachers complained that "Italian boys are not trustworthy, especially on the playgrounds, and always have to be watched, as they delight in hurting someone." The teacher's lament was a familiar complaint on the Hill. In 1915, a local teacher complained of "continual indulgence in alcoholics," by the youth, as well as the lack of "legitimate amusements."<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, Italian "toughs" threatened the future direction of the community. Organized sport would help channel the raw, undisciplined energies of young Italian-Americans into constructive outlets for societally-approved violence. In sports as in life, there exists a fine edge between a keen and healthy rivalry and rancorous, self-destructive competition. Sport had polarized the clubs in the early 1920s. "We had soccer teams nobody could beat," boasted a proud Roland De Gregorio. "But then," he said, his voice slipping noticeably, "we used to fight among ourselves."<sup>31</sup>

The man who helped transform the Hill's athletic direction arrived in 1925. Joseph Causino, son of Italian immigrants, walked into St. Ambrose Church in 1925, eager to proselytize the gospel of sport and brotherhood. Causino, a new breed of social worker, had been formally trained as a recreation director and was employed by the St. Louis Southside YMCA.

Joseph Causino, despite the Italianate sound of the name, was a third-generation Bohemian whose family (originally named Kacena) had prospered in St.

Louis. Raised a Catholic, he later converted to Lutheranism. Having graduated in Fine Arts from Washington University, Causino was forced to cut short a promising artistic career when his family suffered a severe economic setback. Causino found a career with the St. Louis Young Men's Christian Association.<sup>32</sup>

Nationally, the YMCA had made an extensive effort to counsel America's burgeoning youth population. By 1920 the organization had erected over 1000 buildings, valued at ninety-six million dollars. Locally, the YMCA had begun in St. Louis in the 1850s and by the 1920s had established a Southside branch to serve the distant Hill.<sup>33</sup>

Causino discovered an enclave in need of formal direction. The Hill contained no recreational center, not even a playing field. Causino represented the ethos of the YMCA—an appeal for citizenship, the Protestant work/play ethic, the creed of Americanization—and he appealed to the youth on their grounds. “He kept us out of jail,” volunteered one of his many converts, adding,

Because, like I said, we had cousins and big brothers who were gangsters, with knives and guns. It took a guy like Joe Causino to see that we were headed for trouble. . . . We let off steam that way (with sports). And that's why a lot of guys will tell you that, by the grace of God and Uncle Joe Causino, we were all cleancut kids.<sup>34</sup>

“You call me Uncle Joe,” he admonished gang members. “Don't ever call me Mr. Causino.” He recollected his thoughts a quarter of a century later: “Like a lot of people, I had the idea that there was something unfriendly about this place. But they treated me wonderfully.”<sup>35</sup>

Causino—who learned to speak Italian—fully expected opposition from immigrant parents. “My father never liked my playing ball,” remembered Yogi Berra. “He always got sore if I came home dirty and he would smack me for sure if my pants were tom!”<sup>36</sup> Soon after Causino's arrival, an angry parent cornered the youthworker and demanded that he state his intentions. “I want to bring in an organized recreational program,” the undaunted Causino replied—in fluent Italian. “I want to make them better citizens, good Americans.” The immigrant smiled, satisfied with the answer. “That's what we want,” he said, “we want our boys to be good Americans.”<sup>37</sup> Sport became a handmaiden for Americanization.

Countless huddles, rap sessions and confrontations later, plenty of good Americans had graduated from Uncle Joe's school. Grown men forcefully swear to Causino's decisive impact upon their lives and the Hill's future. “The greatest who ever lived. “Dynamite!” extolled Phil Verga. “If you needed dough, he gave you money. If you needed a job, he'd help you find a job.”<sup>38</sup> Les Garanzini concurred:

He was concerned with us young kids on the Hill. . . . He was for clean living, good people. . . . He got us sponsors for each club . . . ours was the Fawns . . . then he had this clubhouse—he'd let us use the clubhouse for the whole weekend—30, 40 boys. Go camping, hiking. A clean life. Lead a clean life. Be active in sports to raise a good, clean body. He was very concerned with the young people.<sup>39</sup>

“It finally got to the point,” exclaimed Lou Berra, “where Uncle Joe got us working together. One of the things that welded us together was sports.”<sup>40</sup>

Causino packaged pride, character, unity, and the strenuous life through the appeal of baseball and soccer. Few denied that Causino's techniques and programs were less than a roaring success. His recreational programs, dovetailed with the extensive St. Ambrose Church youth movement, created an effective hold on the colony's young, leaving little room or inclination for deviation.

Causino was aided in his efforts by the parish church—indeed it is difficult to judge who aided whom. In 1926 the colony built at immense collective sacrifice, St. Ambrose Church. Immediately the Church became the most important social complex in the community. “The Church at that time,” recalled lifelong resident Fr. Anthony Palumbo, “was the center of not only the spiritual activities of the colony, but the social activities gravitated around the church . . . it made for a very closely-known community and closely-knit parish.”<sup>41</sup>

The Church, aware of the gang problem, set out in the 1930s on an extensive youth program, part of which was the invitation to Causino to help organize athletics. Prior to 1930, the parish had been administered to by native Italian priests, all of whom were in advance of fifty years. In order to appeal to the colony's young men, St. Ambrose recruited four young priests in the 1930s two of whom were the first non-Italians to serve the parish.<sup>42</sup>

Fathers Anthony Palumbo and Peter Barabino were exemplary of the new priests; the former appealed to the young with his airplane, the latter with a soccer ball and baseball glove.<sup>43</sup> “No one did more to start it [soccer] on the Hill than Father Anthony Palumbo,” observed long-time sports editor of the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, Robert Burns.<sup>44</sup> Fathers Charles Koester and John Wieberg also worked actively with the youth-sport movement. “We priests were the sparkplugs of the community . . . “reminisced Koester, today a bishop. “Sports were very important to the Hill. You must remember, the Hill was very poor then and soccer and baseball provided entertainment for the people. It also built character and provided an outlet for our young men.”<sup>45</sup>

Soccer and baseball served as a recreational antidote for the Depression-strapped Hill. And beyond the colony, Americans continued to indulge in leisure activities with even greater enthusiasm than before.<sup>46</sup> For St. Louisans,

free entertainment was offered each Sunday throughout the 1920s and 1930s as millions of soccer, baseball and softball fans crowded into urban parks. In 1927-28, for example, over a million St. Louisans attended soccer matches at a cost to the city of only \$1,985, or \$.0018 per capita.<sup>47</sup> Sports received a federal boost in the 1930s as New Deal programs sought to involve urban youth. "I was thirteen years old [in 1939] and just as juvenile as our juvenile delinquents of today," reminisced Joe Garagiola. "That was the reason for this league, a project undertaken by the WPA to keep us juveniles off the streets."<sup>48</sup>

The blistering competitiveness, channeled into a community-wide spirit, proved unbeatable on diamond and turf. The Hill's athletic *risorgimento* upset the balance of power in St. Louis soccer, heretofore dominated by the German Sports Club, the Spanish Society, and the Irish Catholic League. "The Hill had some of the city's most fantastic kickers," contended Bill Kerch, veteran reporter for the *Globe-Democrat*. "They were simply outstanding . . . very well disciplined . . . not vicious . . . the best in the city."<sup>49</sup> Trouncing Germans and Irishmen added a new dimension to ethnic rivalry, proving far more popular than belting the *paesano* next door.

Sports offered an acceptable outlet for the free-spirited Italo-Americans. Soccer matches in particular were impassioned affairs. During the 1929-30 Municipal Soccer League season, 51 players were suspended for roughness and fighting.<sup>50</sup> A typical match in 1934 involving Southside rivals Dog Town and Dago Hill nearly ended in a riot before 3,500 not-so-sedate fans. "The game was tough all the way through," complained Coach Norman of Carlstrom's Dog Town. "This is nothing new with our games with St. Ambrose," he continued, scowling. "I couldn't stand such conduct so I took my team off the field."<sup>51</sup> But the violence and ill feelings were short-lived. Soccer collisions were a mild form of cathartic release, an acceptable outlet for societally-approved violence. "To individuals too ready to follow some subversive drummer," suggested Eugen Weber, "games offered opportunities for self-assertion and sometimes for indulging in competitive violence."<sup>52</sup>

The spirited play exhibited in the 1930s made St. Louis the capital of American soccer, with the Hill shining as one of its brightest jewels.<sup>53</sup> "The Hill was an important breeding ground for soccer players," wrote sports historian James Robinson. "Since 1929 the Hill has been an outstanding center for soccer activity in the St. Louis area."<sup>54</sup> The 1928-29 season was the first in which Hill athletes competed under one banner. That year, soccer players rallied under the banner of Calcaterra Undertakers, winning the title in the city's Foundry League.<sup>55</sup>

In a remarkably brief period, Hill Italians had successfully perfected the team-demands of soccer. In 1924, Louis Jean Gualdoni, a Democratic politician,

could find no local Italian youths to play on his Fairmount Soccer Team. “No one. None,” laughed Gualdoni, today a ninety-year old observer. “There was none of ‘em who could qualify. This was before Joe Causino and Father Palumbo. What I wanted was a winner . . . eventually we got lots of Italians on the team.”<sup>56</sup>

The popularity of soccer on the Hill must be explained in terms of the St. Louis environment. German immigrants had introduced the *turnverein* and soccer in the nineteenth century, and the popularity of the game has persisted through today. Moreover, since the Hill’s geographic and ethnic neighbors, the Irish and German, played soccer, it was only natural that the community’s youth would embrace the sport. Soccer remained a second and third-generation phenomenon; Italian immigrants had neither played nor understood *calcio* in the old country.

After 1930, Hill athletes vied for supremacy in nearly every sport. In the early 1930s the gangs were formally organized into an overarching federation, calling themselves the Royal Knights of Italy (later changed to Fairmount Athletic Union because of anti-fascist publicity).<sup>57</sup> The federation, brainchild of Sam Chinicci, a volunteer, promoted tournaments and intramural competition. “I used to organize parades to motivate the boys,” said Chinicci, then a filling station operator. “I organized the federation with the help of the National Youth Administration.”<sup>58</sup>

Like everything else, sports after 1930 tended to revolve around St. Ambrose, keeping the parish the unquestionable social center of the community. “On Sunday morning, everybody in our neighborhood went to church,” reminisced Yogi Berra:

There was never any question about it if you were going. We went unless we were flat on our backs . . . and it didn’t pay to fake. If you were too sick to go to Mass in the morning, you can bet your life you were going to be too sick to go out and play ball in the afternoon.<sup>59</sup>

When Yogi quit school after the eighth grade, a concerned Papa Berra asked Joe Causino and Fr. Charles Koester of St. Ambrose to guide the errant young man.

Sports, like politics and the brown derby, flourished in urban Catholic America. Sons of Irishmen, Poles, and Italians took to baseball and basketball, football, and soccer. Frank Deford writes:

In the palmy days of yore, when order reigned over innocent games, sport was uplifting, and a glorious celebration, like the Mass. Sport and the church both stood for authority. . . . Heroes were larger than life, canonized as athletic saints, a comforting adjunct to the church’s own hagiology. The Roman Church has always been perturbed by sex, and for its male adolescents, joining a team was considered the next best thing to a vow of celibacy.<sup>60</sup>

Deford's portrayal of the Catholic Church as the bastion of conservatism and the nexus between church and sports fits the well-ordered Hill. Berra claimed:

Another thing that helped in our neighborhood was the church. St. Ambrose's was the big institution on the Hill, and we could count on catching it from the old man if we forgot to go to confession on Saturday afternoon on our way to take a shower at the 'Y.' So we didn't dare do anything too bad during the week because we knew we'd have to tell the priest about it in the confessional on Saturday.<sup>61</sup>

"No problem was so big that Father Palumbo couldn't figure it out," reminisced the inimitable Garagiola.<sup>62</sup> When Garagiola was asked to try out for the St. Louis Cardinals, he began to search for a catcher's mitt. "None of our guys had one," he wrote. "The only one we knew of belonged to Louis Cassani. He wasn't one of the boys, but Father Palumbo said that our Johnny Colombo knew Gino Pariani who knew Louie Cassani. The network began operation and we got our mitt."<sup>63</sup>

The Hill had completed a remarkable athletic transformation in a span of less than 20 years. When in the early 1920s local politicians attempted to organize a soccer team, they could find no qualified Italians with which to man the team and thereby attract Democratic voters. By 1929, the first organized Hill soccer team had won the divisional championship, and by 1940 St. Ambrose climaxed the pre-war successes with the Missouri Ozark Amateur Championship. The fiery center from that team, Joe Numi, would return after the war to lead area soccer teams to new heights. Coach Numi was guaranteed quality players, since his farm team, St. Ambrose, won the Sublette Park Parish School League title eleven consecutive years, 1934 through 1945.<sup>64</sup>

Sports had a catalytic impact upon the Hill, an effect measured far beyond tarnished trophies. Potentially the greatest threat to community stability had been the gang, for if the Hill could not win the affections of its young, the neighborhood was doomed. "If the gang does not become conventionalized in some way into the structure of the community as its members grow older," Frederic Thrasher ominously warned readers in 1927, "it often drifts into habitual crime and becomes completely delinquent."<sup>65</sup> The assorted gangs on Dago Hill were harnessed by Joe Causino, the Catholic Church, and immigrant fathers. So great a transformation had occurred by 1934 that Causino's colleague, Harold Keltner, published a YMCA guide ironically entitled *Gangs: An Asset to the City of St. Louis*. Keltner described an encounter on the Hill:

Good sportsmanship is one result of the direction of athletics. The Little Caesars, for instance, last year played several ineligible men on their baseball team. This they did unwittingly and, when they discovered it, wrote a special letter of apology to all the clubs and voluntarily forfeited all of the games.<sup>66</sup>

Sports became a handmaiden for solidarity, a vehicle which helped transform

factional conflict into creative competition. By 1941, the Hill had become, partly through the medium of sports, an ethnic phalanx. Young and old, Lombard and Sicilian, old-world mustachioed Petes and new world Yogis passionately identified themselves with the Hill, with St. Ambrose, with neighborhood teams. "What impressed me the most about the kids from the Hill," insisted Fr. Anthony Palumbo, priest and soccer coach at St. Ambrose (1932-1948), "was that they were willing to make a lot of sacrifices to play on the team. . . they were willing to sacrifice for the Hill."<sup>67</sup>

That sport played such a critical role amongst Hill youth can be attributed to the ecological characteristics of the locale. These structural factors also reinforced the ethnic dimension of the sport network. Historically, ethnic identification is likely to become intertwined with territorial commonality whenever ethnic residential patterns converge with a working-class population. The Hill presents a striking case of this. Boston's Italian West End—a much studied neighborhood—also exhibited similar characteristics: a strong identification with territorial space, high investments in inter-personal relationships, and strong personal association rather than achievement orientation.<sup>68</sup>

Sports not only crystallized Italo-American feelings internally within the colony, but also provided a public forum from which St. Louisans, and in a broader sense Americans, judged the neighborhood from a different perspective other than busted stills and ethnic caricatures. A St. Louis columnist rhapsodized in 1949:

All is not spaghetti, macaroni and choice wine on the Hill, that famed neighborhood in Southwest St. Louis. The principal occupation is sports and the main export nationally is known athletes. Many people think that it is baseball . . . but almost every other sport has produced a similar quota of great stars.<sup>69</sup>

Observed a reporter from the prestigious *Post-Dispatch* in 1941:

The Hill is a neighborhood of some 10,000 first, second and third generation Italians. It boasts its own factories and stores, its schools and churches. But best of all, it boasts of being a neighborhood with the lowest juvenile delinquency rate of the city.<sup>70</sup>

Organized athletics had distinctly altered local perception of the Italian Hill. But what role had sports played in retarding or encouraging the acculturation of Italian-Americans? Had athletes promoted assimilation into a greater urban society?

Sports played a complex, often conflicting role in the formation of urban-ethnic values. On the one hand, athletics fostered acculturation to American ways of life by mixing nationalities in team play. Sports was a tremendous thing for us Italians," exclaimed Joe Correnti, a dry cleaner who helped organize local soccer teams. "You must remember we were almost a closed community. Sports was an outlet for us."<sup>71</sup> Athletic competition forced Hill players outside the sheltered neighborhood.

Local athletic successes also enabled several dozen soccer and baseball players to attend area colleges on scholarships. According to sociologist Richard Rehberg, participation in sport has the most effect on boys least disposed to attend college by raising their educational expectations to attend college.<sup>72</sup> These successful athletes also served as role models for area youth. In 1940, only one Hill resident had obtained a college degree; following the war, college became more attractive, owing to the successes of the GI Bill and athletes.<sup>73</sup> By 1955, the Hill had spawned a half-dozen professional baseball players, twice that number of professional soccer players, and several national soccer club championships. "It is doubtful," wrote historian Richard Sorrell in describing Woonsocket, Rhode Island, "if any city of comparable size [50,000] produced as many major leaguers [three, including Napoleon Lajoie], let alone from one ethnic group [French]."<sup>74</sup> One neighborhood, the Hill, comprised of only 5,000 Italian-Americans, easily eclipsed Woonsocket's enviable record.

On the other hand, organized recreation promoted ethno-religious identity through competition and the preservation of parish-colony teams. Ironically, the high water mark of Hill athletic competition occurred during a period in which two forces, the mass media and the automobile, were making important inroads into the colony. But the Ford Coupe and Gateway Trolley, the *Post-Dispatch* and Zenith radio, while widening the social vistas of the community, also served to make Hill Italians more conscious of their uniqueness. Urban journalists, eager for unusual copy made a sport of accentuating the Italian character of the Hill and the Latin flavor of its athletes.<sup>75</sup>

The Hill's enthusiasm for soccer accentuated the ethnic dimension of the neighborhood, especially outside St. Louis. John Pooley argues in "Ethnic Clubs in Milwaukee" that soccer fostered ethnoculturalism:

Since the sport of soccer is alien to the core society; and since soccer is the major game of the countries origin of the ethnic groups; and since members of the ethnic groups in question were involved in the activities of soccer clubs . . . it is thereby hypothesized that ethnic soccer clubs in Milwaukee inhibit structural assimilation.<sup>76</sup>

In one of the greatest mass movements in modern history, three million Italians immigrated to the United States in the half-century after 1880. Into the maelstrom of an emerging urban-industrial economy sailed the immigrants, most of whom came poorly prepared for the rigors of modern society. They survived, and in their quest to find a better life in the United States adapted to and adopted the values and institutions of the host society. Historians have made great strides in studying the sensitive issues of *pane e lavoro*—bread and work—but have reluctantly ventured beyond the traditional topics and chronology of the great wave of immigration, 1880-1924.<sup>77</sup> The complex matrix of relationships between immigrant parents and sons, and between second-generation peer groups—a familiar theme in novels—has been largely

ignored by immigration historians. One such issue which affected immigrants and sons was the question of recreation. Future ethnic scholars might well address themselves to the unexplored seams of sport history and the immigrant community, for the study of athletic voluntary associations provides a microcosmic portrait of the immigrant group.

## Notes

1. See Benjamin G. Rader, "The Quest for Subcommunities and the Rise of American Sport," *American Quarterly*, 29 (Fall 1977), 355-69; John C. Pooley, "Ethnic Soccer Clubs in Milwaukee," in Marie Hart, ed., *Sport in the Sociocultural Process* (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1976); Richard Sorrell, "Sports and Franco-Americans in Woonsocket, 1870-1930," *Rhode Island History*, 31 (1972), 117-26; Eldon Synder and Elmer Spreitzer, "Sociology of Sport: An Overview," *The Sociological Quarterly*, 15 (1974), 467-84; Dale Somers, *The Rise of Sports in New Orleans, 1850-1950* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972); Irwin Child, *Italian or American: Second Generation in Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943).
2. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 26, 1901 (Mag.).
3. For an extensive treatment of the colony, see Gary Ross Mormino, "The Hill Upon a City: The Evolution of an Italian Neighborhood, 1882-1955," (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1977).
4. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census, 1900*, National Archives, St. Louis, Vol. 100; *Gould's St. Louis Red-Blue Book, 1921-28*; Voting Registration Lists, 1900-1930, Municipal Archives, City Hall, St. Louis.
5. Grace Marie Keating, "A Study of Americanization of the Italian Immigrant in that District known as 'The Hill,'" (Unpublished master's thesis, St. Louis University, 1935), p. 40.
6. Interview with Lou Cerutti, August 7, 1975, St. Louis.
7. Joe Garagiola, *Baseball Is a Funny Game* (Philadelphia: T. P. Lippincott, 1960), p. 3.
8. *Federal Census For Metropolitan St. Louis, 1930*, Table 3.
9. Quoted in Leonard Covello, *The Social Background of the Italo-American School Child* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), p. 201.
10. Giovanni Schiavo, *The Italians in Missouri* (Chicago: Italian Publishing Co., 1929), p. 81.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Steven A. Reiss, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* (Westport Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 188-92.
13. Thomas Jenkins, "Changes in Ethnic and Racial Representation Among Professional Boxers: A Study of Ethnic Successors," (Unpublished master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1955), pp. 85-89 in Steven A. Reiss, "Race and Ethnicity in American Baseball: 1900-1919," *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 4 (1977), 45.
14. Interview with spokesmen from Laclede-Christy Firebrick Co., and Carondolet Foundry, July 14, 1975, St. Louis; Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, pp 66-74; "Ford adopts five-day week," *Globe-Democrat*, September 26, 1926, p. 1.
15. *Federal Census for Metropolitan St. Louis Tabulated by Enumeration Districts and Census Tracts, 1930*, pp 85-87; Grace Foster, *The Hill* (St. Louis: International Institute Survey January 8, 1934). In 1930 the median size of the Hill family stood at 5.48 persons. compared to the St. Louis rate of 3.41 persons per family.
16. Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford Press, 1964).
17. Elmer Wood, "Fairmount Heights: An Italian Colony in St. Louis," (Unpublished master's thesis, Washington University, 1936), p. 45.
18. *Federal Census for Metropolitan St. Louis, 1930*, Table 6.
19. Ruth Crawford, *The Immigrant in St. Louis* (St. Louis: Studies in Social Economics, 1916), p. 54.
20. Wood, "Fairmount Heights," p. 45.
21. Hill Italian-Americans fared very poorly in terms of occupational mobility. In 1934, only six Italians (05%) claimed professional status. In 1940, only 3.1% of the area's males worked in positions of proprietor/manager. Overall, 37% of St. Louis adult males wore white collars contrasted to less than 12% of the Hill's work force. Foster, *The Hill*, p. 12; Sixteenth Census of the U.S.: 1940, *Population and Housing, Statistics for Census Tracts, St. Louis*, Table 3.

22. Interview with Lou Berra, July 11, 1973, St. Louis.
23. Interview with Sam Chinicci, October 27, 1975, St. Louis.
24. Interview with Lou Cerutti, August 7, 1915, St. Louis.
25. Joe Garagiola, *Baseball is a Funny Game*, p. 15; St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, July 23, 1941, p. 2; hereafter cited as *Post-Dispatch*.
26. Yogi Berra, *The Autobiography of a Professional Baseball Player* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961) p. 35.
27. Thrasher, *The Gang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), p. 25.
28. Letter from Elmer S. Wood to Gary Mormino, August 22, 1973.
29. Wood, "Fairmount Heights," pp. 35-36.
30. Louis Budenz, "A Survey of Conditions in 'Dago Hill,'" *Central-Blatt and Social Justice* (Aug. 1915), p. 126.
31. Interview with Roland De Gregorio, August 28, 1973, St. Louis.
32. Information provided by Causino's daughter, Beverly Estes, Cape Girardeau, Mo.
33. John Betts, *America's Sporting Heritage: 1850-1950* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1974), p. 176; Adele Starbird, *The Story of the YMCA in St. Louis* (St. Louis, 1953).
34. Interview with De Gregorio, *op. cit.*
35. *Shot: The Soccer Paper* (December 1947), p. 1; *Post-Dispatch*, March 11, 1953.
36. *Yogi*, p. 35.
37. *Post-Dispatch*,
38. Interview with Phil Verga, August 6, 1975, St. Louis.
39. Interview with Les Garanzini, August 7, 1975, St. Louis.
40. Interview with Lou Berra, *op. cit.*
41. Interview with Fr. Anthony Palumbo, August 23, 1973, St. Louis.
42. *Historical Review: St. Ambrose Church*, St. Louis Archdiocese, Chanery Archives, Priest File.
43. Interviews, 1971-75.
44. Letter from Robert Burns to author, May 5, 1975.
45. Interview with Bishop Charles Koester, July 9, 1973.
46. Foster Rhea Dulles, *America Learns to Play: A History of Popular Recreation, 1607-1940* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1940), pp. 365-74.
47. James Francis Robinson, "The History of Soccer in the City of St. Louis" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, St. Louis University, 1966), pp. 177-178.
48. Garagiola, *Baseball is a Funny Game*, p. 11.
49. Robinson, "The History of Soccer in the City of St. Louis," p. 185; Letter from Bill Kerch to April, 1976.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
51. *Post-Dispatch*, November 12, 1934.
52. Eugen Weber, "Gymnastics and Sports," *American Historical Review*, 76 (February 1971), 70-98. The idea of the social safety valve was introduced by Frederic Paxson in a seminal article, "The Rise of Sport," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 4 (1917), 142-168. An increasing number of social scientists have rejected the idea of sports acting as a safety valve. "There is . . . good reason to believe that competitive sports often evoke and worsen the aggressiveness of the competitors," writes Ashley Montagu in *The Nature of Human Aggression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 281.
53. Brian Glanville, *A Book of Soccer* (New York: Oxford University Press 1979), p. 124.
54. Robinson, p. 190; Interview with James Robinson, August 7, 1973, St. Louis.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
56. Interview with Louis Jean Gualdoni, August 13, 1973.
57. Wood, "Fairmount Heights," p. 36.
58. Interview with Chinicci, *op. cit.*
59. *Yogi* p.44.

60. Frank Deford, "Religion in Sport," *Sports Illustrated* 44 (April 16, 1976), p. 97.
61. *Yogi*, pp. 44-45.
62. Garagiola, *Baseball is a Funny Game*, p. 13.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
64. Robinson, "History of Soccer in the City of St. Louis," p. 192; *Crusader Clarion*, November 30, 1944, p. 2.
65. Thrasher, *The Gang*, p. 54.
66. Harold S. Keltner, *Gangs: An Asset to the City of St. Louis* (New York: National Probation Association, 1934), p. 8.
67. Interview with Fr. Anthony Palumbo, *op. cit.*
68. Gans, *The Urban Villagers* (New York: Free Press, 1962); Marc Fried, *The World of the Urban Working Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).
69. *Star Times*, August 8, 1949.
70. *Post-Dispatch*, May 9, 1941.
71. Interview with Correnti, *op. cit.*
72. Richard Rehberg and W.E. Schafer, "Participation in Interscholastic Athletics in College Expectations," *American Journal of Sociology*, 73 (1968), 732-40.
73. Mormino, "The Hill on a City," pp. 443-70.
74. Richard Sorrell, "Sports and Franco-Americans in Woonsocket, 1870-1930," 120.
75. *Star-Times*, August 8, 1949; *Post-Dispatch*, April 30, 1976; Letter from Bill Kerch of *Globe-Democrat*, April 28, 1976.
76. John C. Pooley, "Ethnic Soccer Clubs in Milwaukee," 480.
77. In recent years, an impressive number of monographs dealing with the Italian-American experience have appeared. For an overview, see: George Pozzeta, ed., *Pane e Lavoro* (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1979); Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-American* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co. 1974); John Briggs, *An Italian Passage: Immigrants to Three American Cities, 1890-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

